





The Society Wolf

BY LUKE THRICE *pseud.*



John Russell

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THE SOCIETY WOLF

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“TO WHAT AM I INDEBTED FOR THIS ENTHUSIASTIC RECEPTION?”
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THE SOCIETY WOLF

CHAPTER I

THE NEOPHYTE IN FIFTH AVENUE

THE chance, the chance was what he lacked—the opening through which he might see the first steps of his way, however intricate it might thereafter become, toward his ambition. He started up from his little iron bedstead and paced the strip of bare, straw matting between the one window and the door. He stopped suddenly before the square of defective mirror under the whistling gas jet and took intensive counsel with his own reflection.

Beyond and about echoed the grim roar of the city, bound stupidly, unceasingly, to its drudging tasks. Out there the dull thousands toiled their wearying round in hopeless monotony of unremitting effort. The hum of their activities had not hushed with this late winter evening—would not hush for many hours. They angered him, these patient, dogged workers—angered him and amused him. They were gulls, these city folk, toilers and idlers alike, in fustian or purple—all gulls, flouted and exploited at every turn by

men with a little wit. Whether beggar or millionaire, each could be overreached, made to contribute to the ease and support of the one who knew how to use him.

Why should he not swim the golden tide? Others had done it, were doing it, with not half the buoyancy that was his through native shrewdness of intellect and keenness of perception. But the chance, the chance—perhaps it lay to his hand and he was blind to just the one thing essential in launching him.

Robert Carter, in spite of the disfiguring glass, found himself good to look upon according to all outward qualifications, with the immense inward confidence he felt in his ability. He was young, tall, well formed, strongly featured, with rather full lips, a fresh skin, light brown eyes and wavy black hair. There was no flaw upon him. He took note of himself approvingly, remarking how well the new, fashionably tailored suit that had been one of his first extravagances set to his figure, how gracefully he bore himself.

A month before Robert Carter had left his native town in Prince William County, Virginia, to join issue with the city—a country boy, faced determinedly toward wealth and position. But his purpose held no thought of laborious ascent upon the commercial plane. He had not ventured the metropolitan field to make his way through some humble, painful process. He had a fixed idea, and it was not wrapped about himself in the rôle of errand boy, rising through traditional degrees of clerk and bookkeeper.

Robert Carter had developed a degree of cynicism that would have fitted a city bred roué. A twist of nature and a double twist of circumstance had aided him. He had penetrated the sham and artificiality of the gilded show upon New York's upper strata through instinct and the schooling of a broken society idol who had passed a summer near his home. And in penetrating he had learned to admire. These puppets and the lives they led had gripped him. He felt himself to be a man of cleverness, of superior mentality, too wise to waste himself upon actual labor of any kind. He would make himself a place on those heights. He would live on and in those chosen fields. Here was the place for any man whose wits could work for him and maintain him in scented ease. Here were the real "Rubes," and Robert Carter was the man who could use them.

He had taken a modest room in an unpretentious quarter on reaching the city. His original capital had been \$500, carefully laid by during his months of planning. He found himself now, having purchased the necessary outfit of clothes, uncomfortably near the apparent end. And he still lacked the chance—the chance.

Robert Carter turned from retrospect to action. Time for his regular campaign had arrived. He dressed himself in evening clothes, his habiliments of war, to which he had grown fairly well accustomed during his first weeks of apprenticeship. He threw on a light black coat, took his silk hat and cane and set out for the present field of combat, the lobbies

of the big hotels, where night after night, high and low, he sought his opening.

He found the porphyry and gold café of the Empress nearly empty when he strolled in and ordered a drink. While sipping at a table he ran over the evening papers, for he was alive to the possibilities that they might hold for him and they served him daily as text books. As he read the place began to fill. Groups clustered about the columns and a low buzz of conversation sounded pleasantly. He gave ear to it subconsciously as he ran over the sheets. Then, from a little way back of him, he caught the trailing fragment of a jocund exclamation.

“Not with Jimmy Hope—you can’t mean it?”

The words ran into a cackle of mirth, the laugh of callow youth. They fell softly upon the listener’s auditory nerve. Jimmy Hope, as he knew and as any reader of the dailies would have known, was very much before the public just then. The scion of a family of first prominence, he had recently accomplished the frittering of an enormous grand-parental fortune, finishing a dispersal well begun by his father before him during the brief years when that gentleman had held it. His recent blazes of extravagance and scandal had been the talk of all those thoroughfares that have acquired a kind of personality, from Fourteenth Street to upper Fifth Avenue.

Carter cast a casual backward glance. Three tables from him sat two young men, instantly distinguished by garb and manner as members of a fashionable and wealthy set. The gestures of the

one who was speaking flashed the intelligence to Carter that the waiter had made many trips that evening to supply their orders.

“That is absolutely the rummiest——” Again it was the undisciplined laugh of the one whose former exclamation Carter had overheard. Apparently the other, who spoke in lower tones, was unfolding a wondrous matter. Alert to seize upon anything that had to do with the life he had faced himself to learn and ultimately to enter, Carter leaned back carelessly and made a shield between himself and the clatter of the bar with his outspread newspaper.

“Had it from Jimmy himself, I tell you.” Now it was the other he heard. “Met him this afternoon at Mme. Durand’s. I’ve let three other fellows in on it, her brother, Scofield and Stuyver. I’m telling you because we want you to help, to take charge of part of the arrangements. No, you can’t have another. Finish what you have. We’ve got to be moving soon.”

“But how did he fix it? I never gave him credit for so much sense. They watch her devilish close,” said the other.

“At the riding academy. Jimmy met her there this winter, and she didn’t know who he was for weeks, not until he’d made his impression. She’s a romantic thing. When she finally found out and got a whiff of his rep. she rather balked; but by that time Jim had started a regular interchange of notes with her through a groom. You remember how he could dash off the comic verses at college. Killing,

weren't they? Well, he turned that talent to good account, wrote her no end of moving notes about how he was being hounded, persecuted and misunderstood. Said he had reformed since knowing her, and would she go back on him? Did the sentimental and woebegone, and she fell for it. A Hoboken J. P. would have done the trick at just about half-past ten to-night, if he hadn't told me. I owe him a grudge over that Tinfield affair, and so do you. We get a chance to save a decent girl from a scamp, too, and maybe her brother isn't grateful."

Robert Carter was aware of a little quiver of excitement as the voice was drowned in a glass to the accompaniment of chuckles from the other. Jimmy Hope, the spendthrift, broken in fortune and utterly blown upon, so that his fine old name remained his only claim to social recognition, was about to retrieve all by a wedding, an elopement. Here was inside information of a rare kind. But who was the girl? The cautious conversation was resumed and he listened eagerly.

"Hot luck for Jimmy. Perhaps he can get that album with the thousand chorus girl autographs out of hock now, and the portières made of champagne corks that he earned in a week. There ought to be loud rejoicing on the trail when he squares his debts." Thus the callow youth.

"But you don't get the idea. He's not going to get away with it. She lacks a week of being eighteen and she'll have about six millions from her mother's estate. Do you think we could stand to see that go

to Jimmy Hope? Wake up, man, we're going to head him off."

"Huh, that's easy enough. Why don't you go to old Woodbine himself? He'd stop it quick enough."

"What a featherhead you are! Of course he would. But we're going to let them get just far enough to compromise her, don't you see? Her brother made the plan. He knows that if they took her off to Newport or locked her up she'd dream about Jimmy and think a hundred times more of him. And when she came of age she'd just gallivant off with him anyhow. You know what her brother always used to say about me at college——"

The words sank to sibilants. Carter, tense to catch the drift, feared that after all some vital part of the affair was escaping him. Finally he heard:

"She's got some sense and she'll see there's only one way to set herself right. Are you friend enough of mine to stand with us?"

"You bet I am. Count on me," said the callow one, and the two, somewhat unsteady on their legs, but still quite able to take care of themselves, settled their score and hurried into the corridor.

It had come—that chance. Carter felt a tingling flush upon his face as he gathered the significance of this thing and set it up before him. The girl was Miss Woodbine, daughter of the great railroad king. He knew the imposing gray stone house, with its haughty, almost fortresslike, fence on the Fifth Avenue corner. He pictured that stern, hard man and the gratitude he would show to the person who

should warn him of the impending alliance with the notorious Jimmy Hope. For a moment he considered that move, then rejected it utterly. There was a better way.

He glanced at the clock—a quarter to nine. The young fellow had said that Hope planned to be married in Hoboken at half-past ten. He paid his bill and made for the street, buttoning his thin evening coat about him. It was raw and foggy and damp, with the bite of late February.

He formed the germ of a plan as he strode up the avenue, but he saw that he would have to seize the situation as it was presented, since he had little more than an inkling of the plans of the conspirators. One decision he had made already, and that was to help Jimmy Hope. It might not be a happy marriage, perhaps, but here was the opportunity to obtain a powerful friend in making himself the factor which would render the marriage possible. He could not have wished a better man than Hope to acquire a hold upon. For the rest, worse men than Hope have been reformed by adoring wives.

Not that he dwelt particularly upon the moral results of his contemplated action. What he saw most clearly was that Hope was a weak character, amenable to influence, a perfect stepping stone for his uses if the proper strings were tied to him. But Jimmy Hope penniless would be of little value. It was Jimmy Hope with the Woodbine millions to make him a social power who could be of assistance to him. Let him grapple this young man to him

with hooks of obligation and he would have accomplished the most difficult part of his task. He would have taken the first step toward his ambition.

Approaching the Woodbine house he sauntered, keeping sharp watch upon both sides of the avenue. Directly opposite he noticed a dim, motionless figure. The lower part of the house was dark. Lights showed at three of the upper windows. Evidently the elopers had chosen a time when other members of the family were away. He turned the corner into the side street and continued to the end of the block, then across to the other pavement and back again. There was a side entrance, and it occurred to him that the girl probably would leave by that. In any case he must watch from an angle that would command both doors. He crossed Fifth Avenue and took up his position at a point diagonal to the Woodbine mansion.

It was chilly, but when he hugged himself in his coat it was more the result of excitement than of the damp wind. A Holmes officer passed and glanced at him curiously. He unbuttoned his coat and looked at his watch in the light of the arc lamp. The officer, reassured by that flash of conventional shirt bosom, resumed his way. A quarter after nine—nearly time for something to happen, he thought. Beyond the downtown corner the shadowy figure was still standing, facing the front door of the house. Evidently the conspirators had their watcher on the ground.

Down the side street he caught the glare of two head lamps, reflecting along the wet asphalt. The

grinding check of a gasoline engine sounded and ceased. An automobile had halted at the end of the block, near the Madison Avenue corner and on the side toward the Woodbine house. Carter waited a moment to see whether the watcher made a move. Apparently he had not heard and could not see the machine. The Virginian moved slowly toward Madison Avenue.

The automobile was an ordinary affair, apparently hired from a garage. The rubber coated driver had left his seat and was tinkering at the further side of the hood. Carter drew nearer the curb as he came along and obtained one swift, sure glimpse of the interior of the limousine. It showed Jimmy Hope, sitting on the edge of the seat and peering through the forward glass in the direction of the Woodbine house. He had seen the thin, dissipation weakened face too often in the newspapers to mistake it. He glanced toward the chauffeur and saw that the man had not noticed him; then took the situation two-handed, slid up beside the door and opened it half a foot.

Hope jumped nervously back into a corner with a startled exclamation as Carter thrust his head boldly within.

"Pardon me, Mr. Hope," said the Virginian, rather at a loss as to how to begin. "I should not intrude if this were not a very serious matter."

"Go away, please go away," pleaded Hope incoherently. And then, probably from force of habit, "I haven't anything for you."

In spite of the tension Carter smiled at the word. The man before him was so obviously helpless, so pitifully incapable of grasp and management. But every minute counted now. The conspirators might start the wheels of their plan, whatever it was, before he could get a grip on this weakling.

"Listen," he said sharply. "Some of your good friends to whom you confided your plans have fixed a scheme to head you off. Please understand me. Miss Woodbine's brother knows all about it and he's got others to help him. I don't know their names, except that two are Scofield and Stuyver. Don't waste time asking questions. Do what I say. I'm playing on your side."

Hope moved toward him, seeking to make out his face. Carter saw his purpose and moved so that a ray from the corner lamp fell athwart his face. It was well that the man should have his image fixed clearly.

"No, you don't know me," he said, anticipating Hope's objection. "My name is Robert Carter. Remember that when this is over. You can have the girl as you have planned if you follow my advice. Otherwise you've gone to smash, for I tell you by some means these friends of yours will get you and Miss Woodbine in a situation that will turn her against you. She is to be compromised and then they are to offer her an alternative."

Hope seemed to recover some hold upon himself under the torrent of crisp, startling phrases.

"How do you know?" he cried.

"Never mind. The point is, will you do as I tell you?"

The decisive utterance of the Virginian, as well as the extraordinary fact that he seemed to be in touch with the whole plan, won the waverer over.

"Yes, I will," he said. "If things are as you say I have no choice."

"And that's the truest word of your life," answered Carter. "Now, the house is watched. Slip out of here and get off as fast as you can to the nearest cab stand or stable. Hire a hansom. Drive back here. I'll hold the machine with Miss Woodbine in it until I see you coming. Then I'll start off for the ferry. For the rest, have your driver keep close behind us and look alive for surprises. Is the chauffeur paid?"

"Yes," said the other, "I gave him \$50 for this trip. And he's a trusty man."

Hope had some qualities after all, some lingering strain of the iron blood that had made his grandfather one of the terrors of the market. He shook Carter's hand once, stepped quietly through the door and, looking more a man, vanished eastward. Softly, so that the chauffeur's attention might not be attracted, Carter took his place on the cushions, closed the door and waited.

When he had almost begun to fear that there had been some premature interference he caught sight of a splotch of white against the vague black wall of the Woodbine house. The next instant a figure detached itself from the darkness and moved swiftly toward him. The chauffeur, who had finished his

work about the engine, twirled the crank and sprang into his seat. Carter, pulling his hat forward and sitting in the shadow of the corner, opened the door and held it there with one hand.

Within the faint, yellow rays of the automobile's lamp appeared a dainty picture of a girl, a flying scarf tied beneath her chin, a small leather bag in her hand. She bent one backward look toward the home she was leaving, hesitated a second and stepped lightly into the limousine. Carter drew the door with a slam—there was no call for secrecy now—and the chauffeur threw on the power. The automobile shot west.

Halfway down the block to Sixth Avenue Carter pressed a buzzer and the machine came to a slow halt beside the right curb. There came a low exclamation from the shadow into which the girl had pressed, and Carter knew that the time for another explanation was at hand. She must have seen his face as he reached for the button.

"Kindly believe me when I say there is no cause for alarm," he said gently. "Mr. Hope will be here directly."

"Who are you?"

There was a challenge in the tone. Instinctively the Virginian felt that here he had to deal with a very different character from that of Hope. He saw a firmer hand upon the matrimonial helm than that of the spendthrift, if the present project succeeded. Here and now he must win over this half of the partnership if he expected ever to profit by his interfer-

ence in the affair. With the instinctive talent for doing the right thing which stood him so well on later battle fields of his career he threw off the cloak.

"You have a right to know," he said. "I am Robert Carter, little known in New York, a stranger to Mr. Hope. I am, if you like, an adventurer. I came here for reasons personal and of interest only to myself. To-night I have an opportunity for which I have long been waiting. I overheard a plot to block your elopement and to disgrace and humiliate yourself and Mr. Hope. I am trying to help you. In this I am counting upon your common sense, and, in some part, to be quite frank, upon your gratitude. Judge if I have a right to it."

He then told her, in rather distorted outline, the substance of the scheme on foot, making it appear that it rested upon manufactured evidence against her lover which they were to present to her in some way he could not foresee. She heard him in silence. There was a pause at the end while he looked through the small rear window.

Presently she said in a quiet voice: "If what you have told me is true you will find that I have a memory, Mr. Carter."

From over east came the rattle of hoofs and a handsome swung into view, a white bosomed figure swaying on the seat. Carter pressed the buzzer again and the machine darted forward. From his post of observation at the little window he exclaimed:

"I thought so. We have been under observation since you left the house. Probably they are waiting

around the corner until we should be well under way. There they come now, in a big black limousine car. I was right in not letting you slip away to some hotel to meet him."

A powerful machine had crept up behind the procession made by their own automobile and Hope's cab, which trailed close behind, in accordance with the plan. They crossed Sixth Avenue without a halt. Carter measured the distance between the parts of his problem with the eye of a general, keeping careful watch on the shifting traffic for some maneuver, the broad plan for which had formed in his mind. Seventh Avenue was left behind. Broadway was crowded and Carter had almost started to swing the girl out and into a car when he saw the pursuers must surely see them. Eighth Avenue lay behind them, and still the three vehicles kept their single file. Time was getting short. Carter rapidly explained to the girl what she must do if an opportunity came for her to slip out without him.

Approaching Ninth Avenue the Virginian, ever alert, glimpsed a street car coming from either direction. He pressed the buzzer three times and the chauffeur, understanding the signal, threw over his lever. Their machine leaped forward.

He saw the coachman on the hansom lash his horse, Hope waving up at him. The black automobile was about thirty feet behind the cab. The two street cars were almost upon Carter's machine when it dashed through the gap between them, the cab following recklessly hard after. It seemed as if Hope's vehicle

must inevitably be crushed. There were shouts. Carter had a confused impression of clanging gongs and bent figures twirling madly at brakes. Then he realized that his machine and the cab had managed, in some miraculous way, to win free of both street cars, which had come to a halt and were blocking the black automobile like a barrier along the tracks. He punched the buzzer, holding it until the machine ground to a jerking stop. The situation could scarcely last the fraction of a second longer.

He tore open the door.

“Out, quick!” he cried, in an agony of suspense.

The girl seized his meaning on the wing and floated, rather than jumped, to the muddy street. Carter, giving the signal to proceed, closed the door and looked around just in time to see a white gowned figure vanish into the cab which instantly swung north. He remained staring through his peep hole until the cars moved on. As they cleared the crossing the black automobile leaped from the other side. It did not turn into the avenue after the cab, but bore on after him.

He had won.

With smiling elation and some curiosity he now looked forward to falling into the trap which had been so carefully prepared for Jimmy Hope. He had some hint of it when his machine was driven on to the ferryboat. Approaching the ferry house he noticed four four-wheelers, with drawn shades, standing at one side in line. Two of these whipped on board ahead of him. The other two waited for

the black automobile to pass and then followed it. Here was an elaborate something hatching, with plenty of actors on hand by all appearances. The six vehicles, carriages, automobiles and carriages again, took up all the right hand alley of the boat. It was well planned, whatever it meant. His machine was well toward the center and privacy was assured.

The curtain on the little drama rose in midstream. He saw a door of one of the four-wheelers ahead open and a woman alight therefrom. She was closely followed by another. A similar phenomenon was visible from the rear window. He heard the rustling of silks outside the limousine. Then came a low, thrilling whisper:

“Jimmyboy, Jimmyboy.”

Leaning forward cautiously he could make out in the dim light that four flashily dressed women stood near the right hand door of his machine and two near the other. Here was a dénouement! The whisper came again:

“We’re all here, Jimmyboy. Flora and Prudence and Estelle and the rest. Won’t you let us in, Jimmyboy?”

From the direction of the black automobile came a group of long coated, silk hatted men. One of them threw the right hand door open.

“It’s all up, Helen,” said a sharp voice. “Leave that worthless scoundrel to the women he has supported, and thank your brother for getting you out of an ugly scrape. Come.”

Robert Carter straightened his tie, opened his coat,

removed his silk hat and stepped out of the cavern of the limousine to where the light of the automobile lamp fell full upon him.

"To what am I indebted for this enthusiastic reception?" he asked pleasantly of the staring men and women. The man at the door knob rapped out a sharp word of anger and thrust himself half way into the limousine with groping arm.

"Where's my sister?" he yelled, popping out and thrusting a convulsed face at Carter. That calm young man regarded him with frank curiosity. His one regret at that moment was that he lacked a monocle.

"Really, my dear sir," he drawled. "Your sister? Have you lost her?"

Young Woodbine was exasperated to the point of frenzy. He glared and waved his arms.

"Where is she? She got into this machine. What have you done with her?"

Carter smiled tolerantly.

"If any of you are in charge of this gentleman," he said, addressing the transfixed group, "I would like to ask if he is frequently affected so severely. I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, ladies," with a bow, "but I can imagine how painful this must be. You have my deepest sympathy."

Woodbine, feeling the ridiculous figure he cut, made a last attempt. He turned to the chauffeur, who had been a silent, if interested, spectator.

"Didn't you just come from Fifth Avenue and

—th Street? Didn't a young woman get into your machine there? Didn't Jimmy Hope hire you?"

The chauffeur grinned impartially upon the gathering, then settled a dancing Irish eye upon Robert Carter.

"Th' gentleman is sure took bad, sir," he remarked, and Carter thanked his gods that it should have been such a man. They shook hands upon it after the silk gowns and the silk hats had melted away.

CHAPTER II

PLUCKING A BRAND

"MAKE your plays, gentlemen," croaked the metallic voice of the little croupier. His associate at the opposite end repeated the words in the same expressionless manner.

There was the grind of the marble about the rim of the whirling wheel. The fashionable crowd pressed in closer at each side, where the numbered squared maps of the green board showed in yellow and red and black.

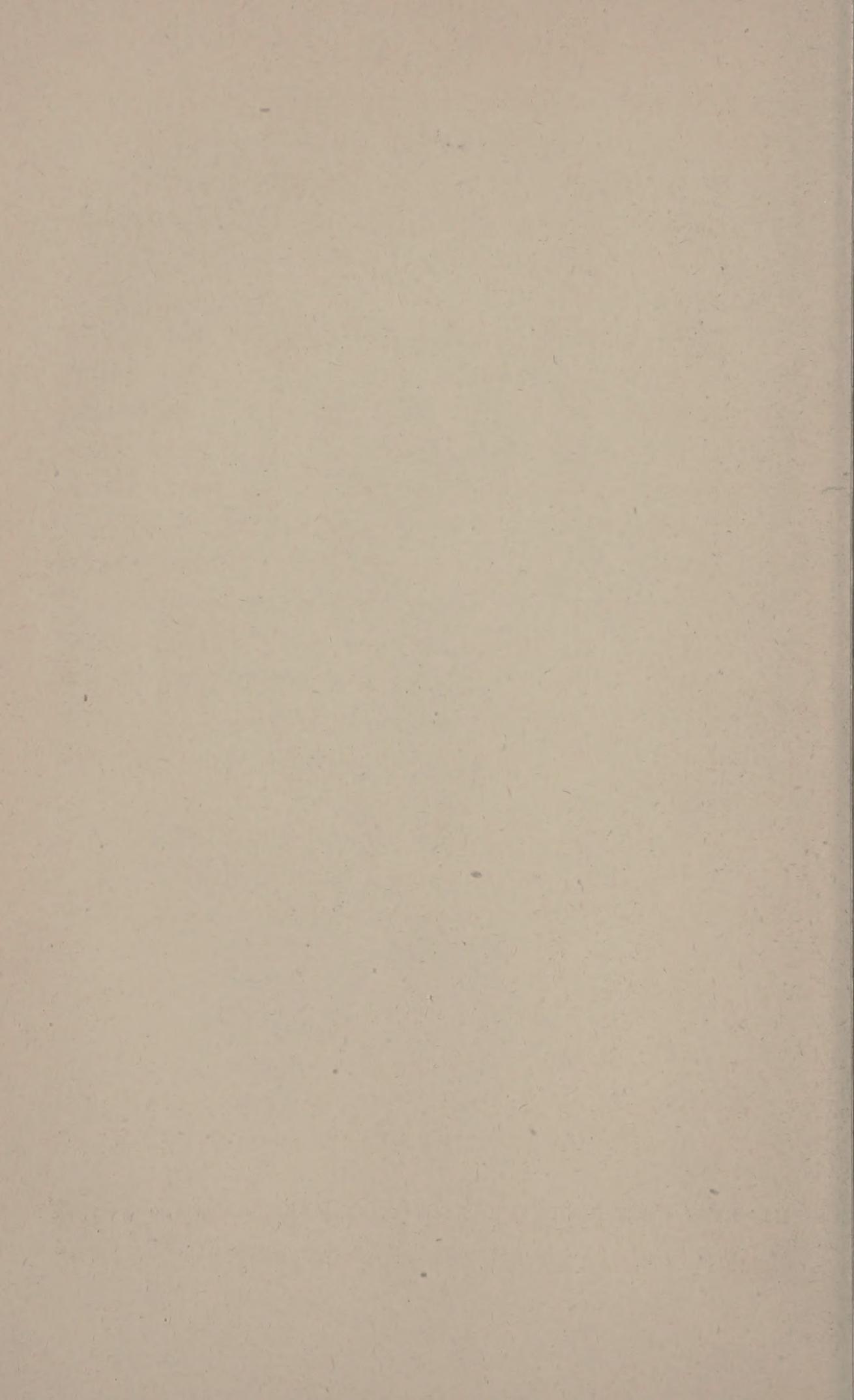
"Plays are made," came the phonographic announcement from one end of the table and "Plays are made" was the answering chant from the other. The mellow clink of gold and the crackle of bills gave way to a single sharp click as the ball met the edge of its first pocket and shot up on the varnished slope.

The shifting of shoulders and reaching of arms that had accompanied the beginning of the spin now ceased. Heads were turned toward the wheel box, where the marble was dancing and hopping upon the running circle of pockets, as if galvanized into some strange, unnatural life of its own. The wheel was slowing. The leaps and bounds of the marble showed



HIS EYES WERE FIXED INTENTLY UPON THE WOBBLING MARBLE.

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less spasmodic violence. Presently they ceased altogether and the sphere settled into a slot bearing the number fourteen. During half a revolution it hung in its position, not dropping wholly into the pocket, but carried on the verge by the yet potent centrifugal force.

Pressed against the green baize of the table a few feet from the wheel box, a small, white hand folded into a tight clenched fist and spread out again, its fingers trembling and nerveless. A young man, scarcely more than a boy, was the owner of the hand. His eyes were fixed intensely upon the wobbling marble. The story of futile dissipation and the ways of the wastrel was writ upon his pale face where all might read, blurring features that held possibilities of strength. He had forgotten the gamester's pose of indifference in this intense moment and was merely human, youthful, suffering in the suspense between hope and fear.

There was one who marked, and, marking, smiled. At the boy's further elbow leaned a handsome man, immaculately fresh in his correct evening clothes, cool, self-possessed. He, too, watched the marble, but with an indifference equal to that on the stolid faces of the croupiers, the bankers and the lookout.

Suddenly the ball, seemingly possessed of a new lease of vitality, rolled from its resting place and meandered along the slot rim, plumping to rest at last in a pocket.

"Eight and black," singsonged the croupiers, and black armed silver rakes swept the table all but clear

in the breath. Under cover of the general movement among the players the pale faced boy leaned back, with wide eyes but with the hard wrinkle of a forced smile about the corners of his mouth. The man at his elbow spoke in a low tone.

"The hunch was right for a minute, Sammy. We didn't pull hard enough for that fourteen."

The boy nodded, with his set smile.

"Well, I guess that's enough for one night," he said. He pushed away from the table, giving place to one of those standing, who immediately took his chair, and walked under the blaze of electrics and through the thin crowd of loiterers to the coat room.

It was there that Robert Carter met him.

"Running bad to-night, eh, Pulsain?" asked that properly garbed young man. The words were casually put, in the manner of acquaintance. Pulsain was not sure he ever had met the one who thus addressed him. But he felt dazed and he had met so many hundreds of fellows about town.

"Yes, rather," he answered, with an uneasy laugh. He had no definite plan in view except to get away from that horrible green table, and the meeting steadied him somewhat. He accepted one of Carter's cigarettes.

"Let's have something cooling," suggested the other, and led the way to a corner table in the brilliant café.

Ordinarily, perhaps, Sam Pulsain would not have been so ready to drink with a man whom he could not place. But the mere fact that the stranger had the

entrée of Gringer's meant something. Moreover, the chap evidently knew him, and he was not averse to company at that moment.

He could not know that Carter had planned for that scene in the cloakroom for weeks.

Carter, a country boy from Virginia, with little money and no friends, had come to New York but six months before, with the one set, even minded purpose of breaking into and subsisting upon the upper heights of New York society. Firm in the conviction that he was eminently fitted for a place among the accepted elect, he had made the metropolis his game, confident that matters of lumber, or steel, or railroads, even of ancient lineage, need play no part in his attaining of his ambition. A small preliminary capital had supported him. Some few successes had been his, the most notable of them being his assistance in the elopement of Jimmy Hope, which, as will be remembered, set all society by the ears and supplied a proverbial nine days' wonder.

He had improved the advantages offered by this first considerable step and had made an acquaintance here and there. One of the results had been to win for him the privilege of Gringer's exclusive gambling place, where he pursued his great purpose cleverly, seeking always alertly for some opportunity to obtain a further hold among the socially powerful.

At Gringer's he had succeeded, with his native keenness and tact, in gaining a standing of familiarity with all the employees and with some few of the habitués. He seldom played, but he had been well

introduced and Gringer made no comment. Meanwhile, under a careful veil of idle observation and by the aid of occasional good luck with a stake, he had made a minute study of the methods of the house, the details of management and manipulation of the tables and of the players.

Sam Pulsain had fallen under his notice. The boy had lost heavily during the last week and to Carter he displayed evidence of a strain. Even a father who stood for eight figures may reasonably be supposed to have fixed ideas as to the amount a nineteen-year-old son may squander, Carter thought. As he eyed that white face and the emotions that moved across it when the marble rolled he saw there the pressure of a secret dread. He had grown to be sure that some reason other than mere chagrin at the losing of a part of his pocket money brought the clenching of that hand.

"Small sympathy out there when a man loses," said Carter pleasantly, as they seated themselves. Pulsain shook his head and glanced back into the glaring room where the absorbed crowd shouldered close. Carter was somewhat at a loss as to his tack. He felt certain that a story lay behind, and he meant to possess it. The boy, removed from the excitement of the wheel, gulped down his drink and came back to normal control of himself.

"You play a system, I suppose," remarked Carter, "or on impulse. One's as bad as the other. I haven't been playing much lately. Wonderful fascination about it, though.

"Friend of mine lost twenty thousand at Monte Carlo last summer, cleaned out. He was walking around the place with his hands in his pockets when he found a gold coin he had forgotten. Threw it on a table and quit an hour later ten thousand ahead. That's the only way one can win."

He rattled on, hoping to interest Pulsain, to draw him out or to start a vibration with the boy's thoughts that would offer a hint as to the angle to take. Pulsain remained quiet, but indifferent. Carter drew in his approach.

"Rum things come from playing roulette," he observed, "if a fellow lets it get a hold on him. Bad game to start on borrowed money."

It was scarcely intended for a direct shot; only as a more intimate feeler. But he caught a quiver of the lips and a slight flush on the sallow cheek. He had touched something. There was a secret, then, behind the air of repose that was the result of wealth and social rank. He feared to bungle with more indirection. Suddenly the sense of mastery that was his in emergencies came to him and he leaned forward. He reached boldly for the key to the situation with the force and precision and instinctive understanding that had won all his points for him in the advance toward his goal.

"Tell me what it is. Let me help you."

Pulsain was startled. He sat back, a fear creeping into his face.

"You can trust me when you couldn't any of these fellows you've known all your life. My interests are

free, not attached to a set or a clique as theirs are. I can see you need some one to stand by and I'm that one. Tell me."

"I—I don't know what you mean," stammered Pulsain.

"Don't misjudge me so," pleaded Carter. "I'm not trying to pry through curiosity. I'm red-blooded, and I know a man who wants a friend. Something is wrong. I have an eye for that, and a hand to mend it with."

He was magnetic, plausible, dominating. His phrases carried conviction and an impression of power. Pulsain considered him.

"Why, I can't even recall your name," he said at length.

"Just plain Robert Carter," was the robust answer, "late of Virginia, now of New York. A man with no strings tied to him, but a member of your own class and fairly competent. Come. What is it? Been over-drawing your account? Or only signing papers?"

The boy, as Carter had felt unerringly he must, yielded to the insistent offer of rescue. He hesitated a moment and then gave in.

"No," he said, "it's not that."

"What, then? Be frank, Pulsain, so I can understand your position."

The stripling was loath to put it into words.

"It's my sister's money," he said finally. "She loaned it to me. The governor has been letting her run her own affairs for two years now. But he's aw-

fully strict. She has to give an accounting every six months." His voice sank to a painful whisper.

"She trusted me. My father is hard. He never gives me much. I told her I had a sure investment that would keep me clear of him. I borrowed from her once before and paid her all right. She thought it was real estate. I made something, but I lost that and then got some more from her."

"How much is it?"

"I owe her ten thousand. The last of it went to-night. I've lost about an equal sum that I'd stacked up ahead."

"When does she have to account to your father?"

Pulsain was agitated.

"That's the terrible thing," he answered. "She must have it to-morrow. Father won't listen to anything if he learns the truth. He's said before he'd throw me off if I didn't straighten out. But he'd be hardest on her if he found out what she's done. She stands up to him when he's in a rage and the upshot of that would be that she'd leave and earn her own living. She could, too; she's clever. But it would be too horrible if I should be the cause of it."

"Steady all, old man," said Carter. He sat back in thought. He saw no moral lesson in all this. He was not concerned in the betrayal of trust and the threatened family catastrophe. But he did see a better opportunity for his purposes than he had hoped for.

"Your sister doesn't know of your gambling?" he asked.

"No."

Carter determined that it should be his to remedy that ignorance. He was no altruist. He would pull the boy out of the hole if he could, but the sister should not be left in the dark as to the part Robert Carter played in averting disaster. He had seen her once or twice in the tea room of the Waldorf, a tall, stately, imperious beauty, with pride of name and family stamped upon her. She could appreciate such a service as he contemplated.

"Come," he said, "we'll begin our little one act sketch right now."

He led Pulsain back through the superheated rooms, winding his way among the saunterers, past the silent, crowded players, to a door at one corner. He pushed it open and entered with his companion.

They found themselves in a little anteroom, where a uniformed negro stood behind a brass railing.

"Just tell Mr. Gringer that Mr. Pulsain would like to see him," said Carter.

The functionary withdrew by another door back of the railing and a second later ushered them through. They entered the inner office.

Gringer sat at a large, massive table in the middle of a room hung with his famous collection of old masters and lined with the curios, brass ware, ancient arms and rare furniture that made his place one of the most artistic and expensive apartments in the world. He was squat, square, with a body that bulged in his clothes, an aggressive, outthrust face and steady eyes. He was planted in his chair as if mortised and cemented there. Conventionally and

quietly garbed in a plain dinner suit, he looked the prosperous, retiring man of commerce. His glance went past Pulsain and settled, with a flash of inquiry, on Carter. The Virginian stepped forward.

"A small matter of business, Mr. Gringer," he said.

Gringer ran the pages of a thin desk book through his fat fingers.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen." His voice was full and not unpleasant. "Sit down, won't you? I was not aware of accounts outstanding against either of you."

Carter smiled. He did not take advantage of the invitation. Pulsain, standing a little apart from him, also remained standing.

"No need to look for entries, Mr. Gringer," said Carter. "We have no accounts, so far as I know."

Gringer looked at him impassively and bit the end from a cigar. His attitude was that of polite, but chill attention.

Carter advanced his attack. He wished the test might come quickly. The first move was the hardest and he snapped it into play without preamble.

"The situation is this, Mr. Gringer. Sam here has lost at least \$20,000 at your tables. He is not unreasonable, but half of that sum was not his. He wants it back."

If his negro attendant had slapped him across the face the gambler could not have been more taken aback. A red flood of anger swept over his clean, plump face. He turned on Carter with lifted lip, but his mood suddenly changed.

"I don't know you very well, Mr. Carter, but I always had an idea that you came from the farm somewhere. Back to the corn fields! You've missed your calling."

Nothing could have reached Carter as sharply as this thrust. It was true—and he knew it—that his six months' experience with the city had not sufficed to give him the easy, confident polish of manner and speech of the part he aimed to take. But Gringer, in spite of his accurate penetration, had made but a superficial estimate of his opponent. If it was an apprentice in the finer accomplishments of the leisure class that now strode to face the gambler across the table it was a balanced, self-sure personality. He did not raise his voice.

"Possibly such a demand does impress you as being a trifle raw. Perhaps I am not following the accepted traditions in regard to your profession. Probably you are not used to objections concerning losses. But I repeat and emphasize—you are to pay back \$10,000 that you have taken from this boy."

The humor of the thing broke upon Gringer and he smiled, smoothly but unpleasantly.

"You are making yourself ridiculous, Mr. Carter," he said, with notable restraint. "I can only suppose it is because you have spent such a short time in the metropolitan atmosphere."

Bill Gringer was sharp, but Carter did not flinch.

"And you, Mr. Gringer, are making a mistake in thinking that this demand, which seems merely humorous to you, is advanced with a false understand-

ing of the situation. I have no quarrel with you or with the way you make your money, except in this one case. For certain urgent reasons I say again, you must return the sum I mentioned to this particular player."

Gringer might have seen at this point that he had not gauged his man or the motive, but he would not.

"I don't care to discuss the matter any further," he said.

"Very well," replied Carter. "Then I shall have to press it."

Gringer lost patience. The veneer that long prosperity and association with gilded refinement had lent him was brushed aside. It was the man in the rough that started from his chair.

"Now get out of here!" he ordered, sharply. "Get out, and take that cub with you before I kick you out."

Carter regarded him calmly and then took a step forward. He leaned toward the gambler over the table and spoke in a low voice that Pulsain might not hear.

"I wouldn't make a scene, Gringer," he said, soothingly. "It might attract attention. Could you survive a raid? And, if so, could you survive an examination of your tables?"

Gringer went flabby, his rage melting from him.

"I think, now," continued the Virginian, still for his private ear, "that you will give the boy his ten thousand. It came easily. You didn't have to work

the electric shift on him very often. He was playing in poor luck pretty consistently."

The man had fallen ashy white. Carter sensed the whirl of thoughts and fears that was racing through his mind. Moreover, he knew that Gringer, if he considered himself seriously threatened, was dangerous and he stepped between the pause and an untoward possibility.

"There is really no occasion for alarm," he said. "It is my business to know queer things and to keep still about them. Your tables are no concern of mine. It is quite to my interest that you continue to enjoy your patronage and that I retain my right to mingle with it. I make only this one demand, no more."

Gringer's hand fell to the table, groped for a drawer while he stood in lowering reflection. Pulsain gasped. Carter watched the hand with brain and muscles taut, ready to meet any untoward move with a swift check. The gambler slowly opened the drawer and drew out—a red portfolio. Without a comment he counted out the bills, then shoved them across the table. Carter took them, handed them quickly to Pulsain and motioned him out.

It was no part of his plan that he should make an active enemy of Bill Gringer. For fifteen minutes he talked with him, and when he followed Pulsain at the end of that time he felt that he had arranged a practicable armistice. Which was well, for Gringer had many and strange resources.

As he moved across the *salle des jeux*, toward the *café*, he heard a page calling Pulsain's name. He

stopped the attendant and took a square envelope from the tray, intending to deliver it himself. The superscription was in a strong but feminine hand. Robert Carter was none of your finical adventurers. He was sure that the letter was from the boy's sister, and this was no affair demanding close observance of the conventions. He slipped into the cloak room, pried up the flap, which was loosely gummed, with his penknife, and scanned the contents. The letter was as follows:

“DEAR SAM: You thought I didn’t know what you’ve been investing the money in, but you see I do. I knew you must be worrying a little; so I’m sending this where it will reach you soonest. Lectures are tiresome, and I never was a bluestocking, Sam. I took a necklace and some other thing to-day and made up the deficit. I suppose they will be missed from the safety vault, but not for several days. In the meantime I commend the situation to your consideration. Lovingly your sister,

“DOROTHEA.”

Carter, with all his cynicism, was conscious of a thrill of admiration. He hurried to a writing table and composed a brief explanation of the turn of affairs in just the style he would have used in addressing a man. He signed it with his own name and prepared the envelope for delivery to the upper Fifth Avenue house. Then he called a page, gave him all the loose change he had and sent him off post haste.

Later he listened to Pulsain's profuse and very real thanks, mingled with frequent exclamations of relief and admiration, while they had a last drink.

"You don't know what you've done for me," said the boy earnestly. "This ends gambling for Sammy Pulsain. I've had my lesson."

"That's all right," broke in Carter, who saw himself for the time in the rôle of social reformer, and found it amusing. "But listen to me. You go right out of here, travel home to your sister and hand her that money quick. And don't linger on the way."

"I'm going," said Pulsain eagerly. "It'll be a surprise to her. I'll go this minute."

Carter smiled at the words as Pulsain hurried into his coat and the two made their way to the street. They shook hands at parting.

"Sam," said Carter, "I guess there are a good many things about my connection with this little matter that are mysteries to you. I'm going to add one more. That's a mighty fine sister you've got. No matter how I know it, she is. You keep close to her and you can't go far wrong."

"And, by the way, if you should happen to think of it some time, old chap, I'd rather like to meet her."

"Meet her you certainly shall," cried Pulsain warmly; "I don't know of any one I'd rather have her know."

Somehow as Carter walked home to his hall room he felt that that promise would be kept. And he was fairly sure of the accuracy of the way he felt about things.

CHAPTER III

A SQUIRE OF DAMES

ROBERT CARTER caught the words as he placed a hand on the heavy fold of the curtain and he stopped where he stood. Couples were crowding through the doorway into the ballroom, but he pressed aside from them and held his place. There was no answer, no repetition of the whispered phrase. He crossed the threshold at the edge of the chatting procession just in time to verify its source.

“The first time he leaves town,” was what he had heard. His instant thought had been that the speaker was Arnold St. Geoffry. What he saw as he passed inside was Arnold St. Geoffry taking leave, in formal manner, of a woman whose face was turned aside. A flush lingered on her averted cheek and St. Geoffry’s eyes at parting flashed a discreet look of understanding. Carter stepped forward eagerly, but the woman was lost in the crowd.

Jimmy Hope, to whom Carter had been useful on one important occasion, had met the young Virginian that evening at Martin’s and had towed him into the nearest club of which that restless but now happily mated and sobered sprig of financial nobility

chanced to be a member. A "ladies' night" was in progress. Carefully guarding his effective attitude of polished ease and sophistication, Carter had made one of a group of young men in the smoking room, where discussion had grown intimate concerning persons not present.

He had kept his ears open and had heard several stories anent Arnold St. Geoffry, younger son of an English lord, whose social career had attracted some attention during the season and whose casual acquaintance he had formed. One of these stories had connected St. Geoffry's name with Mrs. Percival Champney. He had learned that both were at the club this evening. An hour later he had gone upstairs to watch the dancing and to receive, apparently, sudden and startling confirmation of the smoking room tale.

He turned to a bearded man who stood at his side watching the crowded, animated, brilliant picture.

"Can you tell me who the lady was who left this chair near the door?" he asked.

"If I am not mistaken it was Mrs. Percival Champney," returned the other politely. "She started across the room a moment ago."

Carter murmured his thanks and mingled with the throng of spectators, eyes alert for the figure of the woman he sought. But he could not find her.

Five days later Robert Carter sat in his modest hall room smiling over two apparently trivial items among the publications to which he turned for instruction in affairs of social moment. One of the paragraphs concerned Arnold St. Geoffry. After

alluding, as with a sour smile, to his success with "one of the most charming young matrons of the Long Island hunting set," it stated that St. Geoffry had just betaken himself to Hot Springs for two weeks.

Now Carter knew that the society journal was misinformed. That very morning, in an out of the way barber shop on the west side, he had caught sight of an aristocratic profile in an adjoining chair. Side-long observation had assured him that the profile was the property of Arnold St. Geoffry.

Of course this might be merely an accidental error. But what was St. Geoffry, the mirror of fashion, doing in such a barber shop? Carter had not made himself known, for it seemed clear to him that the young Englishman was trying to conceal his continued presence in the metropolis.

The companion paragraph was from the financial columns of a newspaper of that morning. Carter studied it closely.

"A directors' meeting of the Q. Q. Q. Copper Company will be held in Montreal to-morrow. Percival Champney has been in conference with the New York stockholders and will attend the meeting to represent their interests."

Champney away, St. Geoffry in the city under cover of a fictitious departure and Mrs. Champney, "the charming young matron," alone in her Long Island mansion. Such were the threads of the story that Robert Carter was master of, with the whispered

communication he had heard through the curtain to add significance to it all.

Carter cared nothing for the ethical atmosphere of the circles to which he consistently sought admittance. While his attempts to gain an opening, a friend, a sponsor, had placed him at times in the part of a moral censor, such a guise had been fashioned from convenience and not from innate sympathy with better standards. He saw in the complication before him an opportunity to take a commanding position with regard to at least two of the socially elect. He possessed a secret involving the destinies of three important individuals. And he meant to use it.

For Robert Carter, with ready cleverness and insight, had sensed a mad action by a scheming and possibly infatuated man and a flighty woman who had already been weak enough to allow her name to be mentioned with his. He foresaw an elopement. He intended to be present when it occurred.

Robert Carter viewed the flat Long Island plain from the vantage point of a station platform late that afternoon. He had learned the location of Percival Champney's magnificent country estate from the baggage agent, and from where he stood he could see the corner of a white stone gable among the trees half a mile west along the road. The beauties of that residence were common talk. A fitting home for the charming young matron, he reflected.

His abstracted survey of the wooded levels ended while the glow was fading into twilight. The chill of a swift spring evening aroused him. He set off

upon his journey with brisk steps. The stretch of open country was massed in sage and gray, darkening as he advanced. It was night before he reached the lodge at the towering granite gate of the Champney estate. Lights showed at the windows of the outpost structure, of itself pretentious enough for the residence of a prince. Beyond, up the sweep of drive, and visible through the first young foliage of the year, was the vague, extended brilliance of the Champney mansion.

Carter did not pause at the gate, but bore steadily on, following the slender, spiked bars of the iron fence that hedged the park in aggressive privacy. The road was deserted. He left the highway and continued silently along the narrow border of grass.

His plan was far from definite. It might easily be that his whole understanding of the situation had been falsely constructed. What he saw of his own share in it, should it develop as he expected, was little enough. His one purpose was to be on the ground to accompany the elopers, if such they were, and for the rest to trust to his own good fortune and ability in facing emergencies.

He had made a hundred yards beyond the gate when he stopped and glanced behind him. He had not been observed or followed. Quickly he stripped off his dark overcoat, folded it and tossed it over the fence. Then, seeking a high hold, he swung himself from the ground and secured the advantage by gripping the bars with knees and feet. Again he found a grip, higher this time, and so worked himself to

the top. In another moment he crouched among the bushes inside the park, muffled once more in his coat.

His approach toward the house was made slowly and with caution. An overcast sky favored him, though the shrubbery, in thick grown cultivation, offered the impediment of its interwoven twigs, that cracked spitefully at his passage. He won finally to the verge of the front lawn, where, a stone's throw away, the bright, curtained windows of the house confronted him. Here, finding support against a tree, he held his patient post for hours.

The chug and rattle of an automobile was the first interruption of his quiet vigil. It came from the other side of the house, and presently a machine swept into sight about the corner, drawing up in the gravelled drive under the porte-cochère. Carter held himself ready, but there came another snort from beyond and another car drew into line, followed by a third. At the same time the front door opened and conventional figures moved out in a chattering, leavetaking group. Guests were going. Carter rested again against his tree.

After the file of automobiles had passed him, headed for the gate, lights about the place were extinguished one by one, save at a corner on the ground floor, where a subdued glow seemed to indicate the location of the drawing room. He had been minded to remain near the front, but the automobiles suggested a different angle for action, and he began to work carefully about in a circle. The garage was now his objective point.

He came upon the low, wide structure from the rear and peered in through a grilled window. Inside in a row against the further wall were a heavy limousine car and two runabouts. Set in front of them, with its long, lithe body toward the door, like some monstrous mechanical animal about to spring for freedom, was a powerful road car, its searchlights throwing a patch of radiance against the rear of the residence. Here was the first hint of a confirmation of his suspicions. The speedy machine was ready for use. He could see or hear no one in the garage. Apparently St. Geoffry intended to run it himself, and therein was the field the clearer.

Putting aside caution and moving quickly into the execution of the idea that was taking on detail in his mind, he walked boldly about the building and entered.

Carter's knowledge of automobiles, such as it was, had been gained through the few young men about town with whom he had taken a trip now and then. But it was characteristic of him that during these brief outings, which had included a breakdown or two, he had absorbed much practical familiarity with machines. He knew, for one thing, that the road car carried a pressure feed from the cylinder in the rear, and that thin connecting pipes vital to its life ran beneath the tonneau. Just above the cylinder and under the cape top was a steel trunk rack, or platform. There was no trunk upon it.

He needed a wrench and he fumbled with unskilled hands under the front seat until he had found one.

Then he turned off the single electric light that swung from the ceiling, curled himself as best he could on the trunk rack and waited again in the darkness.

Another hour had passed and he had become painfully cramped before he heard steps. Some one closed the rear door of the house and crunched along the gravel. Carter, pressing close in his narrow space and making sure his hold, felt a rocking of the car and suddenly the engine began its rapid pulse and breath. So sharply as almost to wrench him loose the automobile shot out of the garage upon the drive. It stopped before the front entrance.

Carter could see nothing of what passed and was forced to be content with going over the possible results of his ludicrous predicament should he have failed in his understanding of who his fellow passengers were to be and what their journey meant. Voices murmured and whispered hurriedly. There was the jar of a hasty mounting upon the running board, and the machine started again with a jerk. In a flash it had passed through the gates and was in full career westward along the road.

Almost choked with dust and gasoline fumes Carter clung to his precarious perch, slipping from side to side and forced to grasp the canvas of the folded cape top above him for support. He saw that to carry out his plan it would be necessary to change his position. Raising himself cautiously and bracing his feet on the bars of the trunk rack he peered over the top. He was relieved to find that the tonneau was empty. Dimly blotted against the sky he could make out two

figures in the steering seat. At the wheel side the figure was plainly that of a man. A filmy gray of fluttering drapery indicated that a woman was his companion.

The railroad crossing had been reached and passed. Trusting to the speed and the darkness to conceal his movements, Carter shifted his weight to the side and by climbing on the rear mud guard reached the tonneau. He moved into it cautiously, lowering himself first to the seat, then to the floor. Lifting the rubber mat he felt for the loose boards on the bottom of the car.

Carter had no means of knowing whether the interruption of the gasolene supply after he had disconnected the air pipe would cause the machine to stop immediately or within a few lengths. In fact the automobile had made a mile before there came two sharp explosions from the engine and the throbbing ceased. The man at the wheel applied the brakes instantly and as the car came to a halt at a place between two open fields started up from his seat. In a moment he turned and saw Carter, who had installed himself boldly on the cushions of the tonneau.

From the startled exclamation the young Virginian knew that he had been discovered and braced himself for the real test of his power to master the tangle successfully. The man stumbled slightly, but recovered himself and stood on the running board by his seat. His gasp brought the woman around sharply. Ready

as Carter was for surprises, he was not prepared for her cry of terror.

"Percy!" she screamed.

Carter made no move, but sat with his coat collar about his mouth, watching the couple.

"Wh-what the devil is this?" stammered the man in an uneven voice. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his long ulster.

"Just drop that," said Carter crisply, and there was pervading light enough to show the length of steel revolver barrel at the end of his straightened arm. The man's hands rose promptly above his head, while a sigh of unutterable relief came from the woman. Carter leaned over the seat and reached into the pocket toward which the man had motioned, keeping his weapon ready. What he brought out was nothing more dangerous than a compact electric torch of high power. Sitting back and touching the button he turned a flood of light full upon the two.

He saw the pale but composed features of Arnold St. Geoffry at one side of his little picture, and at the other a fair, tender face, with wide blue eyes and framed in a closely drawn scarf or wimple, whence wayward tendrils escaped. He inwardly bent his knee to the editor of the society journal. It was decidedly a charming young matron, none the less so for the startled, pleading expression with which she sought to see beyond the glaring end of the torch. But, with his unerring instinct for personality, Carter felt that it was the man, not the woman, with whom he would have to deal in this adventure.

"Well," said St. Geoffry coolly enough, after a pause, "what do you want, my man?"

Carter smiled, a tribute in itself, since it could not be seen.

"Nothing much, St. Geoffry," he answered. "We'll converse a little if you like and then I'll just take Mrs. Champney back home."

The mention of her name completely unnerved the woman and she sank back against the arm of the seat with trembling lips. St. Geoffry's eyes narrowed a trifle.

"I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mr. —"

"Carter," promptly replied the Virginian.

"Carter," continued St. Geoffry calmly. "But I'd be pleased if you'd come to the point and tell me how much you want."

"In something of a hurry?" questioned Carter, not unwilling to toy with the situation.

"Will \$500 suit you?" asked St. Geoffry.

"Come, St. Geoffry," was Carter's answer in a sharper tone. "That's too common a play. You're cleverer than that. Even if you don't recall me, which I take the liberty to doubt, you know that no one would be breaking into this little affair who was not perfectly informed as to your identity and your plans, as no footpad could be. Try something else."

"Possibly Mr. Champney sent you," suggested the Englishman with a sneer.

"Wrong again, St. Geoffry."

"Then see here." His opponent's jaw set, and Car-

ter noted approvingly that he had not mistaken the man's possibilities. "If you're not a robber or a paid detective, this is none of your business, and you have to clear out. Barring these two occupations you have no possible interest in us and I'll trouble you to take yourself off. I suppose you're some cursed interfering spy, but you're committing an unlawful act in holding us up and you'd better drop it."

It was a strong if a questionable character, and Carter recognized qualities that he could admire, while he scorned them as lacking his own leaven of finesse. But further parley was useless. He talked now at St. Geoffry, but for Mrs. Champney, and set himself to reach her.

"Still another error, St. Geoffry. It is my business decidedly. And," his voice took on a righteous heat, "it's any one's business who is not willing to stand by while a scamp induces a woman to give up everything for nothing. Particularly is it the business of those who have a regard for clean society in general and the standing of the Percival Champneys in particular. That won't appeal to you, I know. But that's all the motive you'll get.

"Now, as for yourself. I can imagine exactly what you have told Mrs. Champney and what you have led her to expect—love, appreciation, understanding, happiness, the usual flimsy lures—with her private fortune to keep you, and maybe—maybe—a marriage after her husband shakes off part of his shame in a divorce. But there are some few facts about yourself you haven't told her."

St. Geoffry, with twitching hands, made as if to spring upon him. He thrust the revolver an inch nearer and continued.

"You haven't told her, for instance, that you were cashiered from the British army for cheating at cards, or the string of low scandals wrapped around your name at home, have you? Or that your family hushed up several affairs at great expense? Or that you could never be received again in your own country? Or about the affair with the Bascom woman in St. Louis since you've been here? If you were really straight and only foolish in this, St. Geoffry, some might be found to pardon you. But when your one idea has been to victimize——"

The Englishman, held from the demand of surging violence within him by the insistence of the revolver barrel, thrust back his wrath while he made his plea to the woman.

"It's a madman, Ellen. He's not responsible. Leave the car. It can't be far to the railroad."

Mrs. Champney did not move. She looked from St. Geoffry to the outlined form of Carter. The Englishman misunderstood the glance.

"He won't dare to interfere further if you come with me," he urged. "There's a train we can catch to-night."

But disillusionment and growing horror showed upon Mrs. Champney's face and Carter read her face aright. The mere physical break in the whirl of unconsidered revolt had turned her judgment upon her act and herself. Carter, by his suggestion of un-

worthiness in the man for whom she had been ready to make her sacrifice, had hastened the collapse of her false emotion. The shock of the incident had awokened her. She saw the thing she had meant to do in its full significance for the first time. Her one thought was to turn, if not too late, from the dangerous step she had already taken. Carter did not wait upon a worded appeal.

"Can you run the machine?" he asked her in a low voice. She nodded. Carter stood up.

"Now, Arnold St. Geoffry, late lieutenant in a regiment which shall be nameless, forward march. Keep in the line of the searchlights and linger not. I'm rather an awkward shot and I might not be able to pick out your arm. You are free to reach the railroad in any way you choose, so long as you don't come within range again."

The young Virginian's voice held firm to the key of command and in it was all the force and decision he possessed in times of acute emergency. Perhaps St. Geoffry also recognized a kindred soul. In the waning light of the torch he stared motionless, one, two seconds toward the unwavering mouth of the revolver. Then slowly and with a last glance at Mrs. Champney, he stepped down from the running board, turned on his heel and moved on ahead. Carter took pride in him, for the man had said never a word more when he knew that he was beaten. The Virginian waited until the figure had faded into the night, and then turned feverishly, wrench in hand, to tighten the

joint he had loosened in the pressure pipe and restore the air.

Perhaps he might never have won, though, if Mrs. Champney had not aided him with her greater knowledge of the machine. Timidly she answered his questions, and it was with an answering thrill of satisfaction that he finally felt the gentle pound of the engine when he whirled the crank.

He sat beside her when she took the driver's seat, and they began the return journey. She needed steadyng, and he spoke to her reassuringly, for here lay the real value of the affair for him.

"You need be under no alarm whatsoever in this matter, Mrs. Champney," he said sympathetically. "The man will not trouble you again. I happen to know that his career on this side of the ocean was nearly run. He will have to leave, and nothing he can say now can touch you. I need hardly say that the whole incident ends here so far as I am concerned. My name is Robert Carter. I shall not tell you how I came to take a part in this incident. There is no call even to thank me for it. I merely trust that I may have an opportunity of renewing our acquaintance in more favorable circumstances. Having already taken so much responsibility upon me, I think I can safely venture to say that I am not wholly unworthy of it."

She did thank him, hurriedly, warmly, incoherently, and after that they sped on to the park, through the gates and up to the door in silence. She asked him inside, and with a view to clinching an advantage

with the charm of appearance and conversation he knew was his, he consented. She had scarcely unwound her scarf, standing all flushed and wholly bewitching in the excitement and happiness of her escape, when there came the crescendo rattle of an automobile from without. They turned in vague alarm toward the door.

It opened to admit a stalwart, upstanding man shrouded in motoring togs and goggles. He lifted his disguise upon a strong, frank, laughing face.

“Percy!” exclaimed Mrs. Champney for the second time that evening and the rest of her welcome was lost against his shoulder.

“Thought I’d surprise you, Ellen,” said Champney, evidently taken pleasantly by surprise at her affectionate greeting. “The meeting was transferred to New York and we had it to-night. Lucky I had that racer in town. You don’t know how good it was to avoid having to be away. But I don’t think I have met your caller.” He looked inquiringly at Carter.

“Why,” said Mrs. Champney, “this is Mr. Robert Carter, a friend—of Mr. St. Geoffry. He came down this evening and after the others had gone kindly took me for a spin in the red road car. My husband, Mr. Carter.”

“Glad to know you, Mr. Carter,” said Champney, with a hearty hand clasp. “I hope Ellen has entertained you well.”

“Mr. Champney,” returned the Virginian, smiling, “I have enjoyed a most delightful and profitable evening.”

CHAPTER IV

MATTER OF FRIENDSHIP

"ANY advance on eighteen? A rosewood antique cabinet, good as new. Are you all done at eighteen?"

Carter, standing at the edge of the crowd about the auctioneer, returned no sign to the provocative glance from under the upraised hammer. The bid was now in favor of his only opponent since the second dollar, a small red faced bundle of a man, in shabby garb, who stood just in front of him. The auctioneer resumed his singsong in hope of further windfalls.

"Going at eighteen, this fine, antique, handmade rosewood cabinet. Eighteen——"

It was the backward glance of the red faced man that had checked Carter. Spurred by competition and a growing curiosity concerning this lone adversary, the young Virginian had pushed up the price to a point six times the value of the piece of furniture in question. The uneasiness of the red faced man had been almost ludicrous. He had fidgeted, delaying his bids, whispering his bids, hurrying them and shouting them. In the second when he named the sum at which the price now stood he had flashed a look behind him.

What Carter read in the fat, discolored face had knocked upon his sense of the mysterious. More than mere cupidity, more than small desire for fractional gain, more than auction room rivalry shone in the black, close set eyes. With characteristic attention to whatever suggested concealment or hidden motive, Carter had abandoned the bidding to study the man and the situation. The wearied hammer was raised in final appeal when the Virginian signaled.

“Nineteen!” announced the auctioneer.

A stir of interest about the circle awakened the functionary to a show of briskness and importance that served, perhaps, to cover his mystification.

“Twenty!” piped the red-faced man.

“A real, antique, handmade——” on went the auctioneer, and with him the price of the cabinet. Carter bid with a nod. The red-faced man continued his former uneven tactics. His nervousness became aggravated. A soiled and crumpled handkerchief was in constant requisition. He did not look around again.

“Thirty,” said Carter, yielding to an impulse. Some looked at him curiously. Others smiled. The agitation of the red-faced man was painful. The auctioneer held the bid open a second, then impatiently knocked the article down to Carter. Wondering at himself the Virginian paid the clerk. He had started toward the door when a thought drew him back.

“Can I have the cabinet taken away now?”

“Certainly,” said the clerk. “I will send a boy for a wagon.”

Carter waited until the vehicle rattled up to the door and followed the helpers who bore his purchase downstairs. He saw it safely loaded, gave the address and started to walk away. As he turned the corner he glanced back. The red-faced man was standing on the steps watching him.

In his modest apartment he drew a chair before the cabinet and examined it carefully. Its outward appearance was by no means remarkable. It was without inlaid or carved work. A few cheap strips completed its ornament. Its surface was scratched by hard usage. One leg was cracked. The double doors were closed and the key was missing. He pried at the space between them and they came open under protest. Inside were three shelves, supported by nails, and nothing more.

Carter was puzzled. He began to suspect that his usual policy of following any odd or unusual circumstance that might offer had led him to attach false value to this unhandsome wreck. Thirty dollars! And he needed a new silk evening waistcoat. He turned away impatiently.

But wait. How if the cabinet had not given up all its secrets? Might there not be a hidden drawer or recess? He smiled at the thought. There was almost too much old century romance in the affair already, with a sentimental junkman as the central figure. He came back to the cabinet and ran a hand under it. With a thrill of renewed interest he was forced to admit that the apparent bottom and the one beneath left some three inches unaccounted for. A tap brought a

hollow sound. He went around to the back and looked closely at the wood.. Cheap boards ran cross-wise and were imperfectly fitted. The lower one alone showed true and smooth. At each side, just beyond the edge, he found a small screw head, sunk in the panel.

After thrice breaking the blade of his knife he was able to remove the screws, and, warmed now to the task, pulled and drew at the lower bottom. Something slipped suddenly and a shallow drawer gave way, clattering into his hands.

In the center lay a bundle of letters tied with green string. The space about the bundle had been packed loosely with newspapers, as if to hold it in position. He lifted out all the newspapers and set them aside, noticing that one bore a date five years old. The letters were in uniform envelopes, plain and slightly tinged with yellow. Those on the outside had been faced inward. As he was about to untie the string, reflecting upon the possible significance of what he had found, his little clock struck seven. He recalled that he had an engagement for dinner that night with Sam Pulsain.

He replaced the newspapers methodically and closed the drawer, then, moved by some instinct of caution, replaced the screws, tightening them into their places. He laid out his evening clothes and dressed hurriedly. Before turning out his lights he thrust the bundle of letters into his pocket.

It was a gay gathering at Pulsain's that night. The boy had been allowed the full use of the house for

two days during the absence of his parents and sister. Since the affair at Gringer's Carter had comported himself with studious care toward the Pulsains. They were powerful allies to his purpose, could he win them, and he had refrained from giving either brother or sister the slightest impression that he wished to press the advantage he had won. He was conscious, moreover, that grateful as they might be he had stepped to their aid through a rather questionable atmosphere. He had awaited an invitation to meet the family, but it had not come, and he had begged off from most of Sam's generous invitations. He wanted something weightier. The event on hand, however, was a "stag," and offered an opportunity to mingle with a desirable set of young men.

Carter conducted himself well and before coffee was reached had become the center of a laughing group that drew eyes from the rest of the table. The Virginian bore himself as a man of the world, ready of tongue, nimble of wit. He began to feel that the evening marked a distinct advance for him. He was in the midst of a telling personal anecdote, which he had cribbed from Montaigne, when the butler whispered deferentially in his ear that a gentleman wished to see him in the front hall. Surprised and uneasy, he excused himself with a droll remark and went out. He could think of no one who might know of his presence at the Pulsains'.

The butler indicated a small reception room off the hall and Carter entered it. Under the subdued lights in the middle of the apartment stood a man, an utter

stranger to him, dressed conventionally, with Inverness open and silk hat in his hand. He was short and dark, with cropped black mustache and aggressive chin. He shot a sharp glance as the Virginian appeared within the curtains.

"Mr. Carter, I believe?" he began brusquely.

The other nodded.

"You bought a rosewood cabinet this afternoon."

Carter's pulse quickened. He had not had an opportunity to look at the hidden letters which were at that moment in the pocket of his overcoat, but the direct statement of the stranger indicated that he had not been wrong in suspecting some secret value attaching to them.

"You seem to be well informed," he answered coldly.

"As it happens," agreed the stranger. "You found some letters in the cabinet."

"Well?"

"They were left there through the oversight of the former owner, who now wishes to recover them."

"Are you the former owner?"

"I represent that person."

"I am afraid that will be insufficient."

"The letters are not yours."

"You forget that if I, as you say, bought a rosewood cabinet, I took it as it stood, without specification as to its possible contents."

"I repeat, Mr. Carter," said the stranger, advancing a step, "the letters are not yours, and you have

no possible concern in them. They are personal and private, and——”

“How do you know I have found any letters?” asked Carter suddenly, moving forward in his turn. “What is your source of information?”

The other eyed him a moment.

“It is quite a minor point how I know,” he answered; “but you opened the cabinet and took out the letters. Whether you had previous knowledge of them or not—I suspect you had—you found the secret. Now I want them.”

“This looks very much to me like burglary, with a touch of highway robbery added,” said Carter reflectively.

“Now, see here,” the stranger broke out with an abrupt gesture of impatience, “I’ll give you \$500 for those letters, and I advise you to take it.”

“Thanks awfully,” said Carter, smiling. “Your principal is at least liberal.”

“Will you take it?”

“It has occurred to me that granting the existence of these letters they will bear investigation before the matter proceeds any further. Suppose we end this interview right now?”

“You give up those letters,” the other flung back at him angrily, abandoning all pretense of polish or reserve, “do you understand? Don’t think you can get away with any of your gold painted city airs on me. You’re nothing but a cheap grafted, living in a five dollar room and doing the shine wherever they’ll let you butt in. Climb down and hand over the let-

ters or I'll walk into that room where your gulls are and tell the bunch—tell them your only home is a hole in the wall, your only clothes what you carry with you and your only stake a nervy bluff. I might tell them, too, that you've got a bunch of letters for a blackmailing dodge. In any case I can make a scene that will land your little game on the rocks. Oh, I know your kind, I do. But you can't come it with me."

"Blackmailing," said Carter thoughtfully, without a trace of uneasiness; "thanks for the word."

As Carter read the man he was capable of making just such a move as he had threatened, and, absurd as it seemed, the Virginian could not afford a disturbance. Questions would be asked. His position was too uncertain for any such risk, not safe enough to withstand unsavory advertisement from any source. He might call the police, but that would mean publicity and he could not see his way to that until he knew the purport of the letters. The stranger had gaged his true standing with alarming accuracy and from his remarks Carter thought it likely that his room had been entered during the evening.

"My friend," he said, turning to the other, who was frowning and slapping one hand with his gloves, "I will take your proposal under advisement. Wait here, will you?"

Hurrying down the hall he entered the cloak room and took the bundle of letters from his overcoat. Loosening the string he turned the first one face up. It was addressed to a woman, at an uptown hotel, in

a firm, broad handwriting. He took out the enclosure and scanned the first few words, then turned quickly to the signature.

"Homer Bidwell."

Blackmail. Such was the plain significance of the affair, and as he ran through the letter he understood why such efforts had been made to obtain the package. The conspirators could have chosen no better victim for such a plot. The newspapers had been full of the attempts to oust Bidwell from the control of the Grapnel Insurance Company; full also of his vigorous campaign for proxies against the approaching election of directors. He had made headway through shrewd, aggressive tactics, advertising and a show of reorganization. But a breath would overthrow him. The letters would spell death to him, for here, in all the baldness of the written word, was the story of his folly. They were all addressed to the same woman and Carter skimmed through one or two more to glean the essential facts. He wondered for a moment why the red-faced man had allowed him to overbid for the cabinet, but reflected that the incident would have attracted attention if the price had gone much higher and that his own actions must have argued a knowledge of the contents.

Meanwhile his own situation was awkward and called for instant action. The stranger had the measure of his weakness, and for the first time he needed some one on whom to lean. Sam Pulsain was the only person present on whom he had a hold. Even to call

him in it was to chance all he had gained through his months of effort. But he had felt vaguely that he must stave off some such attack before he had gone far and he must face the test. He went to the dining room, looked in and after a few seconds caught the eye of his host. The boy read the signal and, excusing himself, came out.

"Sam," said Carter without preamble, "I'm in serious trouble. I'm not the man to impose on a friendship such as yours and mine, but this is a case in which only a friend can act. There's a man here bent on slandering me and kicking up a row. Aside from the fact that it would be unpleasant for your guests, it would be mighty hard on me as the cause of it. Whatever he can say about me in your hearing, of course, would give me no uneasiness. Can you help me to get rid of him?"

Pulsain was quick to speak.

"Count on me, old man," he said. "He's in the reception room, eh? Oh, Phillips," he called to the butler, over the stairs.

"Yes, sir," came the respectful voice of Phillips.

"Come up with Johnson, the chauffeur, will you? without making any noise."

Pulsain marshaled his men quickly and quietly, merely giving a few brief directions to wait upon his signal. Leaving them in the main hall he entered the reception room with Carter. The stranger still stood under the chandelier. He looked up with curious interest at Sam's entrance.

"May I ask what you are doing in my house?" asked Pulsain."

"Certainly," said the stranger promptly. "I came to get certain property held by Mr. Carter which does not belong to him."

"Your presence here is objectionable to Mr. Carter and to me. I must ask you to leave."

"Sorry you don't like it," returned the man carelessly. "But Mr. Carter knows how to get rid of me. He's only got to hand over what isn't his."

"In that case I shall have to have you thrown out," said Sam sharply, and at his wave his followers appeared in the doorway.

The stranger took in the situation with an understanding glance.

"All right, mister, you've got the call. I'll go. But before I do let me put you wise to this four-flusher who calls himself Robert Carter. You think he's one of your kind, don't you—with family, and money, and standing, and all that? Well, he's just a 'con' man, pure and simple. He's playing you and the rest of your crowd for good things. Oh, he's smart enough, with his good looks and his nimble tongue. But he is nothing but a faker, probably a reformed bartender, I should say. He hasn't a cent in the world except what he can graft from marks like you. See? Take a tumble to him before he gets away with your rolls or pulls off some stunt that'll make you the laughing stock of the town. He's robbing me, and he'll rob you if you let him. Just think over what you

know about him or where he came from. Damn little, I'll bet."

Pulsain looked at him unmoved. "I'm waiting," he said.

The stranger laughed unpleasantly and put on his hat, passing off his discomfiture in good style.

"All right. But just remember what I said. Good-night, gentlemen," and he swept by the group into the hall. The door closed behind him with a slam. Sam dismissed the attentive servants, then turned to Carter with a smile. Carter, who had eyed him keenly throughout the little scene, met his glance as frankly.

"Now that's over, old chap, let's get back to the game; they'll be missing us," said Pulsain. And the Virginian, following him, knew he had stood the test.

Carter returned to his home that evening by a circuitous route, having in mind a certain red-faced person and an individual with a bristly mustache. On reaching his boarding house he made his way cautiously upstairs. His door was never locked. He stood on the threshold listening for several minutes before he moved swiftly to the gas jet. The flaring flame showed no lurking intruder, but lit up a picture of disorder in which the rosewood cabinet stood as the central object. Its secret door had been forced, and by no gentle hand. Its bad leg had crashed to ruin. Fallen forward, as upon one knee, it held the remnant of the shattered drawer from which the newspapers trailed in confusion. His trunk and bureau had been rifled and the contents strewn upon the floor. His few paltry possessions had been kicked

and thrown about. Anger stirred within him as he noted the wanton damage. After double locking the door and drawing the window shade he considered his next move.

There were the letters, first of all. Untying the bundle again he laid them all out on the bed and went through them carefully. Here and there he came upon names, and with an eye to their possible future value he noted them and their connection with the scandal methodically in his little society memo book. With all the details clear he could appreciate the full value of his find. To a man of Bidwell's wealth and immediate position the letters were beyond price. He looked up from the last letter to the wreck about him. Trifling as the injury might have been to another, it meant much to him. The purchase of the cabinet had nearly exhausted his resources. Some indispensable garments were irretrievably ruined. He needed money badly. It was with a grim smile that Robert Carter prepared to retire that night.

The young Virginian had little difficulty in obtaining access to Homer Bidwell in the offices of the insurance company next morning. There was something in his manner and his appearance that seldom failed to recommend him as a gentleman worthy of attention to official buffers and private secretaries. He announced important business with the president and within a few minutes was ushered into the small inner room, where the financier sat before a wide rolltop desk.

Bidwell was tall, angular, with smooth, strongly marked face and hair prematurely white. He measured his visitor with cold eyes. One hand held Carter's card and his air bespoke cold inquiry. He waited as one who need not unbend. The Virginian took a chair unbidden and in a leisurely fashion that seemed to stiffen the elder man's attitude still more.

"There was a rosewood cabinet, Mr. Bidwell," Carter began easily, "which recently came into my hands."

The insurance president made no acknowledgment, his expression showing no change.

"Quite by accident I discovered that it contained some correspondence of yours," continued Carter. The silence that followed grew oppressive.

"I must ask you to be more explicit, Mr.—ah—Carter," said Bidwell distantly, referring to the card.

"The letters were all addressed to the Cherrington Hotel," the Virginian added. Bidwell's revolving chair creaked suddenly, but there was no change in his pose.

"I thought you might be interested," suggested Carter after another pause. Again he awaited some response.

"The rosewood cabinet, at the time I purchased it, seemed to be the object of the collecting zeal of two gentlemen, one with a very red face and the other with a stubby mustache and a decidedly unpleasant way of conversation," he went on.

"Friends of yours?" asked Bidwell calmly.

"Quite the contrary. I thought you might know.

who they were and perhaps be able to explain their attachment for the cabinet. The thing itself was apparently not to be classed as a *pièce de luxe*. They were inordinately fond of that cabinet," said the Virginian, like one who comments upon a remarkably curious phenomenon.

"In fact, they attempted to take it away piecemeal during my absence. Their failure to do so made at least one of them quite objectionable in his personal resentment toward myself." He shook his head, as if in contemplation of the unfortunate obsession of the disappointed collector.

"I do something in the collecting line myself, at times," said Bidwell presently, "though quite as an amateur. That is a most attractive pin you are wearing, Mr. Carter. Do you mind letting me examine it a moment?"

Carter took out the pin, a passably good imitation of a scarab in thin gold setting, and handed it over.

"Evidently a relic of very great value," said Bidwell, gravely inspecting the stone. "I really must take the liberty, the almost unpardonable liberty, of asking you to set a price upon it." He drew a check-book toward him, picked up a pen and turned his clear, cold eyes upon the Virginian.

Carter arose, flicked a cigarette ash from his sleeve and, picking up the pin, readjusted it in his cravat.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Bidwell," he said, with the utmost reserve, "but you are mistaken. The pin is not for sale. To return to the object of my visit," he continued, "I desire to give over to you certain

property upon which no one but yourself has any possible claim."

He thrust a hand into an inside pocket and brought out the package of letters, tied with the same green string, and laid it before the insurance president.

"Sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

Bidwell dropped the pen and sat back, with the first hint of a waver in his glance, taking in the letters as his eyes came again to Carter's face.

"Not at all, Mr. Carter," he said, in a tone that had undergone a subtle change. "I take it kindly in you, sir. May I hope to see you again?"

Carter smiled.

"For myself, Mr. Bidwell, I shall be charmed to continue our acquaintance."

The president left his seat and shook hands with the Virginian at the door. The men exchanged a final look at the threshold.

"Good-morning, Mr. Bidwell."

"A very good-morning to you, Mr. Carter."

As Homer Bidwell sat in his chair thumbing over the pile of letters a moment later he made a remark, apparently to the crystal paper weight on his desk.

"It is indeed a rare and admirable thing to find a young man with strength of character capable of resisting a dishonest impulse."

And the paper weight, which did not know Mr. Bidwell in his weekly rôle of Sunday school superintendent, because it never left the office, reflected a distorted image of Mr. Bidwell's face, with a curious curl at the corners of the mouth.

CHAPTER V

A FREEBOOTER'S PRIZE

IT was the measure of his social progress that Robert Carter received his invitation to the north shore residence of the Gatz-Browns as merely a preliminary to a greater end. A few months earlier it would have stood as a decisive triumph in itself. Now it meant that he would have three days under the same roof with Mrs. Joyce Pulsain, one of those who wore the golden keys at her girdle.

To attend Mrs. Pulsain's first October reception was a privilege sought by many dwellers among the loftier circles where the Virginian had never penetrated. It was well toward the end of the summer, and time was ripe for scheming if he was to find his name on the list. His little item of advance information concerning the presence of the grande dame at the gathering had been obtained from Sam Pulsain, her only son.

In Carter's intimacy with the boy he had steered a most circumspect course. He had never recalled Sam's promise that he should meet Dorothea Pulsain, the talented sister. He had never yielded to off-hand requests to dine with the family. While con-

tent to keep Sam as a trump he had not intended to force the play. He knew that Sam's domestic standing was none of the safest and that if he was to acquire a definite hold upon the Pulsains it must be through direct attack. Here was his opportunity to approach Mrs. Pulsain himself and in his own way. An impression once made, Sam's friendship would serve to confirm it.

A trap was waiting at the railroad station, and he was rolled away through graded green vistas and graveled roads to the sweep of hill where the quaint brick and white colonnaded mansion commanded a wide view upon the sound. From the front of the place the descent gave upon a strip of beach and a handsome three-winged boathouse. Gatz-Brown welcomed him in the open, wind swept hall. Carter had met his host several times at the Percival Champneys', and had filed away the ruddy faced little man with his curling white galways and brisk manner as a friendly and approachable individual.

"There you are, Carter. You're well beforehand," he said, heartily, as he shook the visitor's hand. "Mrs. Gatz-Brown is out with young Tenny in his motorboat. We hardly expected any one on this train. Lucky I sent the trap on a chance. You'd have been stranded, my boy. Ha! ha! We'll just stroll around a bit if you like."

Carter followed him out upon the hill and back toward the stables, one of the greatest delights of life to the sturdy old stock manipulator. On the way he gathered some points as to the persons he should

meet during his stay. His shrewd guess that he owed his own presence there to the Percival Champneys was soon verified.

"We'll have to make up a fishing party, I expect, for Champney," said his host. "Capital fellow, Champney. Quite mad on fishing. But you won't have to join unless you want to. Nobody does anything here that conflicts with his own particular hobby. If you want to ride I can show you some of the best saddle horses in the country. There are autos, too, though I'm just old fashioned enough not to care for them, and a fleet of water craft. Amuse yourself, my boy; that's how we arrange matters here."

Carter joined cheerfully in the elder man's homely and cordial conversation, winning the broker's heart by his appreciation of the stable. He gathered on the way back that there would be about twenty in the party.

"Mrs. Pulsain is to be here, is she not?" he inquired.

"Yes, she's coming with Mrs. Dusoy, a relative, I believe. But I've a sad blow for you, young chap. Her daughter will not be here. Away with a schoolmate or some such bothersome person. I confess I'm disappointed myself. A marvelous girl, Carter."

So he rattled on until they had completed a detour and reached the boathouse and landing float, where a high powered gasolene launch was just drawing in. Carter knew the tall, slight young man who stood awkwardly in the boat as Edgar Tenny. Mrs. Gatz-Brown sat in the stern. The amateur yachtsman was

patently ill at ease at being thus compelled to execute a nice maneuver before spectators and bungled his landing badly. Carter and the attendant aided to draw the craft to the float after Tenny had backed and filled futilely for several moments, to the chuckling delight of Gatz-Brown. The young Virginian was greeted amiably by his hostess and all four returned to the house.

When the guests assembled in the drawing room before dinner Carter had his first formal introduction to Mrs. Joyce Pulsain. He had known from common report that the society leader was wonderfully well preserved, but he was unprepared for the slender, youthful beauty and grace of this woman of forty. He marveled and admired as she acknowledged the meeting with a gracious smile. There was nothing artificial in her appearance or in her manner, and he was conscious of the charm of a personality which, quite as much as position and wealth, had contributed to her importance.

She turned casually to one of the other guests after a conventional remark to Carter, and in the movement he glimpsed the gulf that separated him from the queen of the elect. There had come such moments before and they never embittered him. They merely served to show him the difficulty of his task. With watchful eye, ready tongue and wit he sought refuge with Mrs. Champney. He was of no possible importance to Mrs. Pulsain, who need pay slight attention to chance acquaintances. But he meant that

she should regard him in quite a different light before they left the North Shore.

He learned next morning at breakfast that Mrs. Pulsain and Mrs. Dusoy, who bore all the characteristics of a companion and dependent, were to accompany Tenny in his motor boat. Tenny, who, it was understood, was a favored suitor for the hand of Dorothea Pulsain, had made haste to monopolize the grande dame for the first day's outing. The rest of the party split into groups. Carter accepted an invitation to play tennis with a newly married couple and Mrs. Gatz-Brown, preferring to remain near the house.

After luncheon he walked out on the terrace to find the sky overcast, with promise of a heavy blow from the northeast. Tenny and his motor boat had not returned. The Virginian studied the situation, remembering Tenny's lack of control over his craft, and without saying anything of his intention he slipped up to his room and dressed hurriedly in yachting togs. When he came down again the veranda was empty. He descended to the boat landing. The aged boatman in charge shook his head when Carter asked to have a small cockpit sloop brought to the dock.

"She's breezing up, sir. We get some nasty squalls off here."

"Oh, that's all right," said Carter reassuringly. "I can handle a boat all right, and at worst I can only get a ducking. That craft was made for heavy weather. You might take in a couple of reefs."

The sailor obeyed with much shaking of the head,

and a few minutes later Carter was embarked. He headed well out on his first tack, then laid his course for Smithtown Bay.

There was a choppy sea running, but the little sloop, decked over forward and for a foot on either side of the cockpit, slid through and over the waves with an ease and elasticity that showed her capable of weathering a gale if need be. The Virginian had made no idle boast in announcing that he could handle her and he braced himself confidently at the tiller. He kept a sharp lookout for Tenny's launch.

He had made more than three miles, close hauled on the starboard tack and running well off shore. The wind was rising. He would have felt more comfortable with a third reef, though he was satisfied that his craft was in no danger. Then, far ahead, across the intervening expanse of curling white caps, he caught sight of a dark object uplifted for a moment. Between wave and wave he altered his course a point and bore down toward it with increased speed. In a moment he saw it again and could make it out as a boat with figures in it wallowing and drifting with the scud, apparently helpless. He made up to windward again and then with loosened sheets winged to close quarters.

Approaching the craft, which was rising sluggishly to the sea, he recognized it for Tenny's motor boat. One of its three occupants, which even at a distance he could distinguish as Mrs. Pulsain, sat upright and unmoved in the stern. Near her, clinging to the side of the boat and waving frantically to him, was her

companion. Tenny alternately appeared and disappeared, stooped and straightened in the task of bailing. At a cry from Mrs. Dusoy he paused and all three white faces were turned toward the nimble sloop, which, with its sails sweeping the water, skimmed lightly toward them.

Carter, trusting to the light weight and buoyancy of his craft, brought up all standing neatly to the lee of the laboring launch. Running to the bow he tossed the long painter to Tenny, who caught it and made fast. The launch thus served as a drag anchor for the sloop, which was kept at a safe distance by the wind. The Virginian, lifting his cap gallantly and holding by the jibstay, stood where he could read the faces and attitudes of the two women and the man.

Mrs. Pulsain, dripping wet, was very erect, very cold and very reserved. Tenny's thin, pinched features bespoke abject fear and cowardice as he crouched, a drenched and shivering figure, with his hands still clutching the end of Carter's painter in a drowning man's gesture. Mrs. Dusoy was sobbing in a pitiable state of terror. A glance from Mrs. Pulsain overlooked them with contempt and spoke volumes to Carter. Spray was bombarding the craft in sheets with each wave.

"A little hard luck?" was the Virginian's first hail, as he balanced himself to his springing foothold.

It was Mrs. Pulsain who answered him, as calmly as if holding a colloquy in a drawing room.

"Rather poor management on the part of Mr.

Tenny, I should say. Can you assist us, Mr. Carter?"

"With pleasure, Mrs. Pulsain," he answered, raising his voice against the wind. "I will do what I can. I'm afraid," he continued, inspecting the launch, "that there's too much water in your craft. The engine is undoubtedly short circuited. But there is no immediate danger."

As if to add an element of irony to his speech a heavier wave struck the launch and shot a white deluge of spray over the three figures. Mrs. Dusoy screamed. Tenny groveled. Mrs. Pulsain did not even remove her eyes from Carter. He thought her, in that moment, the most remarkable woman he had ever known.

Carter appeared to be studying some possible method of rescue, glancing from the launch to sea and sky. Inwardly he was exulting. He knew the truth of his statement. There was no danger to the occupants of the power boat. The wind was no longer rising, the sky was clearing. There was a shelving beach to leeward. The launch could easily keep afloat until shallow water was reached and on the course she was drifting the wind would drive her behind a protecting point within half an hour. Meanwhile he meant to play his advantage to the utmost.

"Can you take us on board?" asked Mrs. Pulsain.

"I can carry only one," said Carter doubtfully. "But I must warn you that it would be a very difficult undertaking in this sea to shift a passenger. I

am not afraid to try it, but perhaps it might be safer to signal for help and wait for the life savers. There is a station around that point."

Mrs. Pulsain showed her first sign of agitation.

"Anything rather than that, Mr. Carter. The whole absurd affair would surely come out in the newspapers. I will take any risk you do not think is too great."

"Still, I can only take one," repeated the Virginian.

The society leader hesitated a moment, then made her decision. Carter had foreseen what it would be and had foreseen, moreover, its result.

"Emmeline," said Mrs. Pulsain to her companion, "you will get into Mr. Carter's boat and follow all his directions."

Mrs. Dusoy glanced once at the frail sloop, dancing and bobbing at its tether, and sank back on the cushions, moaning.

"Come, Emmeline, you must act at once," insisted Mrs. Pulsain, shaking the other by the shoulder; "this is simple lunacy."

Mrs. Dusoy held frantically to the side of the launch and could not be induced to move. Mrs. Pulsain looked pleadingly at Carter. For answer, he looked anxiously skyward, then:

"The launch will be safer with two in it, Mrs. Pulsain. I think you would better venture it."

She nodded assent and the Virginian, deftly catching his painter at a slack, hauled in swiftly. Running back he pulled at the sheet and held the tiller over until the tiny sloop swung with her counter

toward the launch. Reaching with his boathook he caught the other craft's brass railing and drew in rapidly. It was an operation requiring quick judgment and action, for the sea had not fallen. He counted upon the stanch and light structure of the little vessel to withstand a shock.

As the gap narrowed he braced himself at the shrouds and extended a hand to Mrs. Pulsain. She reached it and, half lifted, half carried by her spring, she made the side of the sloop. Carter ran forward again to the painter. Tenny was bringing it in hand over hand.

"Stop that!" cried the Virginian. "Let go the painter!"

"Do you want to leave us to drown?" answered Tenny wildly, and Mrs. Dusoy's wail was added to his own.

"Mr. Tenny, sir, will you kindly let go that rope?" said Mrs. Pulsain, grasping the situation. Still Tenny hauled in the frenzy of his fear, forgetful of all but that the smaller craft was to abandon him. Carter snarled at him:

"Drop it! You'll sink us all!"

The launch, swerved with her quarter to the sea by Tenny's efforts, slid into another heavy wave and shipped half of it. Tenny cried out and tugged madly. At the same instant he stumbled and fell backward across the engine, a strand of the rope in his hands. Just as his prow was about to crash heavily into the side of the launch Carter, with quick thought, had severed the painter with one stroke of

his knife, fending off the collision with his foot. The push brought the sloop into a favorable position, and, tumbling into the cockpit, he hauled on his sheets, holding the tiller with his knees. In a breath the sloop had left the wallowing motor boat behind and was cutting smoothly out on the port tack.

Carter helped to make Mrs. Pulsain comfortable on the weather seat with a loose tarpaulin and began to plan for an understanding with the woman who held a reward in her gift that was beyond price for him.

Bedraggled, soaked with brine, her hair blown awry, her neat white and blue yachting dress clinging in ungraceful folds about her, Mrs. Pulsain was never forgetful of her dignity or self-control. The Virginian had ample opportunity to remark the coolness and composure with which she proved herself a thoroughbred. Her eyes still snapped with indignation at Tenny's last cowardly move as she glanced back at the launch.

"I am greatly indebted to you, Mr. Carter. Not only for removing me from a ridiculous position, but for relieving me of the company of that offensive creature. Do you think that Mrs. Dusoy will be safe?"

"Perfectly, now that the launch is lightened," returned the wily Carter. "Look," he added, pointing to something of which he had been aware for the last five minutes, "the life savers have put out around the point."

Mrs. Pulsain actually shuddered.

"What a narrow escape. Think of being found in that miserable little launch in this condition and snapshotted and questioned and written about for weeks! I never would have heard the last of it."

Carter laughed.

"You seem to think publicity a greater danger than the raging main itself," he ventured, feeling his way toward a more intimate ground. She did not resent it, acceding his right tacitly.

"Very nearly," she smiled, "though looking back I can see that I should have been glad enough to accept even the life savers if it had come to the final question."

Carter appreciated her motives in adopting a light tone, but he determined that while she attempted to evade an embarrassing display of gratitude by such tactics, he would entrap her at her own game.

"How did the launch get into difficulty?" he asked.

"It was not the launch, but Mr. Tenny that had the difficulty," she answered. "He was impossible. When the clouds came up I wanted him to put ashore, but he wouldn't. What a spectacle he made of himself." She dismissed the unfortunate Tenny with a gesture of disgust. Carter eased the sloop toward home. As he busied himself with the sheets he was conscious that she was inspecting him carefully with the all embracing, sidelong glance of a woman who weighs and appraises in an instant. It was pleasant to know that his cap set well upon his handsome head and that the blue serge coat and white trousers became him.

"Where did you acquire your skill in seamanship, Mr. Carter?" she inquired, adjusting her hair with a few deft touches.

"About the lagoons and river mouths of Virginia, where I was born, Mrs. Pulsain. I owned a boat as soon as I could walk."

"You have not lived long in New York, then?"

"Only a year."

"That accounts for the fact that I have not met you before," she said.

"I am the happier in having remedied my loss in such a timely manner," he smiled back gracefully. Encouraged by her answering smile he took a more direct course.

"One finds it difficult to establish a new circle of acquaintances when one is removed from one's own section, Mrs. Pulsain. The Hopes, the Champneys, the Bidwells and the Gatz-Browns include my list of friends here."

She measured him again. After a pause she reverted to their immediate situation.

"This will be a preposterous story for the crowd. And when they know it will surely spread."

"What harm then?" queried Carter, who was puzzled at the insistence with which she returned to this incidental phase of the adventure.

"Why, don't you see?" she broke out. "I'm not a school girl, to be rescued in romantic style and brought back looking like a drowned rat. They talk enough now if I make a move that is not in keeping with a dowager of sixty. Heaven knows what they'll say

to this. And my husband will never let me put my foot in a boat again."

Carter smiled in earnest at the tone of vexation. She was a very woman after all, society leader and grande dame though she might be, with her petty vanities, her inconsistencies, her trivial anxiety over appearances and the judgment of others. He felt sure of her. She was far from overawing.

"Allow me the liberty of a suggestion," he said, gaily. "The sun is out again. Go forward on the deck and dry off. I'll cut out a mile or so and we'll take an hour more in getting home. By that time, unless you're considerably less capable than I believe you to be, no one will ever suspect that you've had a wetting. So there's your dreadful melodrama disposed of."

"But Emmeline and Mr. Tenny."

"Oh, you've nothing to fear from them. Tenny won't be apt to go into details. And I guess you can restrain Mrs. Dusoy. And as for me, why, I'm a co-conspirator."

The twinkle with which he outlined his plot brought a rippling laugh from Mrs. Pulsain. As he watched her he reflected that she had come to be, in fact, not far removed from the schoolgirl she had professed horror at resembling. She turned toward him sympathetically, charmed from her defenses by his tact and spirit.

"Oh, if we can only do it. You're putting me under a great many obligations to you, Mr. Carter. How can I repay you?"

"Why," he said, dwelling playfully upon the word, but with a keen glance at her face, "in return you can be a guide for me through the social wilds if I seem to be a proper subject."

She looked at him with a hint of sharpness and sudden reserve. But her smile lingered and he boldly held to the situation with a clear, genuine laugh.

"You might even begin my initiation with that reception of yours. I've been led to believe that it's one of the thickest jungles of all to penetrate."

For an instant he feared that he had overshot the mark and lost. The move was the daredeviltry of finesse. He seemed to see all the hardness that her face had lost in their closer association return to it. But with all the strength of his individuality, all the dominance of his nature, he held fast the charm of the play situation they had woven between them. Then she laughed and held out her hand.

"You are clever, Mr. Carter. And now for your sun parlor."

An anxious group was gathered on the landing float to meet them as Carter ran in before the wind late in the afternoon.

"Ahoy."

"Where have you been?"

"Were you in the storm?"

"Mrs. Dusoy and Tenny were nearly drowned."

Mrs. Pulsain, quite dry and presentable once more, though somewhat rumpled as to attire, accepted Carter's hand in stepping languidly to the float.

"Wasn't it fortunate?" she said. "I transshipped to Mr. Carter's sloop and we had a delightful sail through it all. Just wind enough to make it interesting. We saw the life guards go out after the others. Isn't it time to dress?"

CHAPTER VI

A REVERSE ON THE MARKET

THE bald man with the fussy tie and the diamond ring on his little finger came up to Carter in Lesser's brokerage office. His thin voice sounded across the rattling of the tickers, the hum of conversation and the monotonous calls of the blackboard clerk.

"Mr. Carter? Pardon me, Mr. Carter. A word with you, sir—just a word."

The Virginian, secure in the superior armor of flawless clothes and perfection of manner, looked askance at his questioner and made as if to pass.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he murmured coldly.

But the bald man, smiling and mopping his brow, held his ground easily.

"Very likely. Still, I will make so bold as to presume upon it. I have a proposition that might interest you, I think."

Robert Carter was the last man in the world to play the victim in a bucket shop game or to waste his time with the petty rogues and swindles of the street, but it so happened that he was idle, that there

was no one about that he knew and that he was just curious enough to wish to discover how this bald man meant to use him. It was sufficiently remarkable that his name was known. He seated himself in a vacant corner and prepared to listen.

"You're not to be blamed if you shy off at this for a while," began the bald man, fumbling with his erratic tie. "I'm willing to believe that it is—well, unusual, Mr. Carter."

The Virginian showed no surprise.

"I've taken considerable interest in watching you for some time," continued the bald man. Carter eyed him.

"You flatter me," he returned.

"I'll forgive you the dig," laughed the other, settling back genially into the leather cushions. "But the point is this: Without any desire to convey offense, I have made myself fairly familiar with your way of life and general habits."

Carter began to stiffen. Decidedly, this was uncomfortable. He thought first of St. Geoffry, then of his unknown antagonist in the affair of the rose-wood cabinet. But the bald man hurried on, noting the suspicion in the Virginian's face.

"If I took the trouble you would see that I must have had a motive. So I had. I am the representative of a group of operators having very wide interests and engaging in a great variety of activities. Recently they assigned me to pick out a young man familiar with the district, smart enough to execute commissions and with such connections that he could

appear to invest on his own account. Do you get me?"

"Well?" said Carter.

"Well, it's a plain business offer. I noticed you and followed you up. You are the one we want. You are on speaking terms with some big men. You are straight. To be frank, you look and act the part of the wealthy young loiterer. And unless I have slipped up the inducement we can offer you will prove acceptable."

"I don't think I understand the nature of the service you are seeking," said the Virginian, still on his guard.

"Why, nothing more or less than to follow the instructions you will receive from day to day, placing orders as you are told to. You must be able to see the reason. There are others in the same business, fellows of good family but no funds, who are useful to manipulators in concealing big market moves. I make no gaudy promises. I am offering you employment that will give you personal prestige without risk and without fear of discovery."

"I shall have to consider it."

"Do so," returned the other. "My name is Weldstone. You can find me at my office in William Street. So long, Mr. Carter." The bald man waved his diamond and was gone.

The Virginian found some difficulty in adjusting himself toward the proposed position. It was alluring, and there was no denying the fact that it might supply very welcome assistance. But he scanned it

closely. His social advance had been too hardly won to permit the slightest indiscretion. In his policy it was better to refuse a million than to lose standing with any of the friends he had so laboriously cultivated. He had heard of such arrangements, however, and could see that they offered desirable advantages. To be able to show money, to handle large stakes, to pose as he had never been able to for a man of wealth—there were possibilities for him here. The mere tickling of his vanity meant nothing. What drew him was the apparent chance to buttress his importance. It meant that he could approach a class of men whom he never could have impressed on the recommendation of perfect clothes and polished manner.

He saw Weldstone in Lesser's the next day and had another interview with him. He put his questions with the utmost caution and watchfulness. Within half an hour he was satisfied. According to the agreement he was to call upon Weldstone each morning for orders. He was to have the power to command sums of money in several banks, placed temporarily at his disposal.

This was the road by which Robert Carter entered the field of finance. He was well chosen for his rôle. Within a month he had handled \$60,000, placing them in the dark and simply as the pawn of the powers employing him. Had his cynicism stood in need of fresh lessons he could have drawn them from his experiences during that month. As a well dressed idler who blinked at the blackboards and exchanged

an occasional greeting he had been remarked but slightly. As a young man with money to play he was one to be recognized. With an eye characteristically set upon taking all the lead he well might, he skilfully built up the impression that he commanded large private resources and that so far he had only felt his way.

Among the intimacies which his new occupation enabled him to foster was that with Gatz-Brown, the wily Talleyrand of the 'Change, whom he already knew more than slightly. Figures loomed and figures faded in the kaleidoscope of Wall Street, but the ruddy little man with curly white galways always formed a part of the design. From the height of fuller knowledge Carter saw in Gatz-Brown one of the shrewdest, most farsighted and successful stock manipulators in the country. He always knew how far to swim in the dominant wave, drawing out before disaster and chuckling serenely to the surface when reaction set in.

It was impossible not to like Gatz-Brown, and aside from the social obligations under which he had placed Carter, the Virginian found him a valuable study. He made it a practice to drop into the operator's office at least once during the week and chat about thoroughbreds, the passion of the millionaire's life. Gatz-Brown put a few casual questions to him one day concerning his presence in the district. Carter answered offhandedly, but he was quite aware that he could not deceive the financier in such a matter. If Gatz-Brown really cared to find out the source of

any one's activity the information could not be hidden from him.

In due course Carter met the four other men who, with Weldstone, composed the group of his employers. They were built of and for money—hard, sharp, unsympathetic. They formed interesting subjects before the clinic on his observation. Among them Weldstone alone seemed most human. He rather liked Weldstone.

He had been invited to luncheon with all five. There was that in the air by which he was conscious of a definite purpose in the event. It cropped to view presently.

"You must know Gatz-Brown fairly well, don't you?" asked White, a grizzled broker with a shifty eye.

The Virginian admitted that he did.

"Notice you look in on him pretty regularly."

Again Carter assented. There was a moment of silence.

"Ever hear the old man drop anything about the market? You ought to pick up something good that way."

Carter eyed the speaker distantly.

"Do you mean to ask whether Mr. Gatz-Brown may not at times make some inadvertent remark that would have a bearing on values?"

"Something of that kind," was the answer, and there was a short laugh about the table. Carter noticed that Weldstone did not laugh.

"Mr. Gatz-Brown may have said such things," said

Carter slowly, "but I have never tried to remember them."

White stared.

"Never tried to, eh? Better make a note of them next time. We might have use for them."

"I will bear your instructions in mind," returned Carter precisely.

Several weeks later Carter had sent in his card to Gatz-Brown and was seated in the little anteroom to the private office. The clerk, preceding him from the outer rooms, had walked across the apartment, directing him naturally to the chair nearest the partition. From beyond came the indistinct rumble of voices, scarcely audible, for the dividing wall was firmly made. Carter was not interested. He yawned and disposed himself comfortably in the chair.

Suddenly the knob on the frosted glass door leading into the financier's sanctum clicked and the voices became distinguishable, as the door itself was held ajar the fraction of an inch.

"——and, as I say, you are placing me under a debt which I can never hope to repay."

The voice of the speaker was almost tearful. It was that of a man, but soft and pitched rather high. Carter did not recognize it.

"Tut, tut," came the amiable tones of Gatz-Brown. "You have been unfortunate—acted on poor advice. After this keep out of the street. It's no place for one of your calling. And remember what I said about keeping it to yourself."

"You are most kind, Arthur. I shall not forget this. X. Y. Z., you said?"

"Yes. And buy—not sell. See if you can get that right," said the manipulator, dropping his voice. "Buy for a twenty point rise and keep mum. It's all over if the thing gets out."

Then, with a burst of cheery good-bys, echoed more faintly by the other, he apparently shook hands with his visitor. A second later the door swung open and the stranger crossed the anteroom. He was thin, slight and dressed in clerical garb. He hurried by with short steps without noticing Carter.

Several minutes passed before a clerk from the inner room came in to inform the Virginian that Gatz-Brown would see him. He found the financier seated at his desk, busily engaged with a mass of papers.

"Hello, Carter," was the jovial greeting; "sit down, my boy, sit down. How's the tape running for you the day? Did you get a bit of that Yellow Rose Copper trimming? No? Now, that's unfortunate. By the way, I bought a new roadster yesterday, a dream. You must come out and see her."

So ran the rapid fire of his conversation, popping trivialities and street gossip like a gatling gun, and all with a bland, almost fatuous, smile. It was hard to reconcile this chubby little individual with his cheerful, inconsequential comments and the fearsome dictator who juggled fortunes every hour. Carter met him on his own ground, the only possible way

with Gatz-Brown, and stayed his usual time. As he started to rise the manipulator stayed him with:

“Don’t forget your umbrella.”

He pointed to one standing against a chair. The Virginian disclaimed it.

“It’s not mine.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Gatz-Brown, “then it must by my brother-in-law’s. He was here just before you came. Wouldn’t have made the mistake,” he continued with a grin, “if I’d looked at it closer. Isn’t it eloquent of rustic virtues and the cloth? You’d swear, now, that no one but a country clergyman could own it. One of my sisters married a small, struggling minister years ago. He’s done nothing but struggle ever since. He drops in on me now and then. A decent enough chap, but simple, quite simple. Good-by.”

The Virginian went away in thoughtful mood. Here was one of those elusive tips that formed the basis of so many wondrous tales afloat among the gilded canyons, one of the chance straws to which hardened and sophisticated veterans of the street were apt to attach great importance in trimming their sails for the financial wind. He ran over the incident with close attention. Apparently the clerical brother-in-law had sought to swell a scanty income by venturing into the thorny paths of speculation. Apparently, also, he had sustained the inevitable scratches in passage. The balm offered by Gatz-Brown was X. Y. Z., an industrial stock that had hovered sluggishly about par for a year or more. But in going over the incident one thing dominated his

thought, one thing that would not be reconciled with his conception of Gatz-Brown. The financier was not the man to leave an open door upon his confidences, even by accident.

Carter slept little that night. He passed the hours in going over the situation, bringing to bear all his power of keen analysis and all his native intuition, the two qualities which gave him his great aptitude for the peculiar task he had set himself. At the end he came to the conclusion that here was the best opportunity he had had to place himself beyond the pinch of necessity. Recently he had improved the little sum he possessed and had cleared himself of debt by successful eighth chasing. But his total capital was inadequate for the affair into which he had stumbled. He needed a stake—needed it badly.

His early visit to Weldstone next morning was accompanied by a request that his five employers be gathered together for a conference. Weldstone good naturedly translated the occasion into a luncheon at which he would be host, and for the second time the Virginian was one in the circle of money hunters that had engaged his services. When cigars had been reached Carter related, without addition or variation, the incident of the previous day at Gatz-Brown's.

"I felt at liberty to reveal this, gentlemen," said the Virginian, with a sidelong glance at Weldstone, "because it was picked up in the legitimate round of my duties. Any one might have been in the office at that time and might have heard what I did. I leave you

to draw your own conclusions and to act accordingly. I have told you nothing but what happened."

The group broke up without comment, and Carter accompanied Weldstone to his office. He knew well enough that there would be a later meeting of the brokers to consider action on his information. In the meantime he desired some private conversation with the man in whom he had the greatest hope of friendliness.

"Weldstone," began the Virginian, when they were together in privacy, "I come to you because you are the one who knows me best. You told me once that you had looked into my personal history. In that case you know that my record is straight, that I have made a fair start, that I have some powerful friends. You should know, moreover, that some day—some day, I said—I shall arrive."

He threw into his speech the sincere decision and force that were the outgrowth of his complete, unwavering faith in himself. Weldstone's beady eyes twinkled at him.

"What then?" he asked cautiously.

"Just this: I want a loan of ten thousand from you or credit for ten thousand at your office. It is extraordinary, I know, to ask such a thing of a man in your position and business. But it is a fair gamble as I look at it. Even should I lose I am sure to be able to repay you some time. In the meantime this is my one opportunity. I have no money."

Weldstone had recourse to his necktie, which he adjusted nervously.

"I will go so far as to consider it, Carter," he answered. "Certainly, as you say, this is not in the line of regular business. How long is this tip good for?"

"I should say for three days," returned Carter at haphazard. "Say until Friday."

The other nodded.

"And kindly say nothing of this to your associates," said Carter as he took his leave.

On Wednesday and again on Thursday Weldstone failed to mention their little affair when Carter called for instructions for his usual work. The Virginian did not remind him. On Friday morning the broker gave his answer.

"I can't see your proposition, Carter," he said with watchful eyes. "I can't afford it. Sorry, but the thing is impossible."

Carter bowed gravely, and made no comment.

"Oh, by the way," called Weldstone as the Virginian was about to close the door, "I am about to leave town until next Tuesday. You can fill in your time as you like until then. The market is rather dull."

Any one conversant with his disappointment would have looked to see the young man in gray humor as he walked away from the broker's office. That same any one would have been surprised to see the smile that kindled the handsome face.

Promptly at two o'clock, the hour when Carter was always to be found at Lesser's, Weldstone bustled in and plumped into a chair beside the Virginian, who was calmly going over his note book.

"I climb down, Carter," the broker exploded, mopping his bald head vigorously. His necktie had flown beyond all bounds. The other looked at him in surprise.

"Here, take my pocketbook, my ring and my shoes," continued Weldstone, with a grin. "You can have your ten thousand." He sank limply against the leather cushion with a sigh.

"I thought you were going away," said Carter mischievously. Weldstone passed it off with a wave of his diamond.

"You fetched me," he said. "It was well done. There was something like fifty thousand subject to your orders in one bank alone. I almost broke my neck stopping it after you sprang your request. I may as well tell you now. I removed the stop, but I watched every bank and you as well—and you never reached out a hand. Come. I owe you the best drink money can buy."

Carter indulged in a little pardonable self-congratulation as they walked toward a place of refreshment. Throughout his campaign toward the citadel of the socially elect he had been meticulously careful in money matters. He knew instinctively that here was the shoal upon which many a hope as ambitious and as well founded as his own had gone to wreck. It was the truest indication of his sagacity that he had avoided the acquisition of the smallest sum in a manner open to suspicion. He had few scruples. He was simply wise enough to be honest. And, furthermore, in this particular case he had foreseen the

exact test to which Weldstone would submit him. And now to cancel part of his debt to the broker.

The paper was signed and Carter received the slip showing the amount to which he could claim credit in Weldstone's office.

"How high do you think it will go?" asked Weldstone when the transaction was closed.

"How high will what go?" returned Carter.

"Why, X. Y. Z., of course." There was an interval, during which the broker showed some astonishment and the Virginian looked at him steadily.

"Do you purpose buying X. Y. Z.?" asked Carter finally.

"Do I purpose? Why, of course. What else? I have bought already. Isn't that what you wanted the credit for?"

"Not exactly," returned the Virginian slowly. "I am going to sell."

It was a long interval this time. The necktie demanded much attention, but the broker's gaze was never removed from Carter's face. His own was blank for some minutes. Then a grin broke across it. He extended his hand across the table. Carter returned the grip in silence.

"I shouldn't care to confide my intentions to too many persons, Weldstone," said Carter at parting, and the other nodded his understanding.

Carter began his coup on Saturday. There was still no sign of life in X. Y. Z. Inert and safe, it hung suddenly at 98. The Virginian went about the brokerage offices as usual and placed some buying orders

on the stock, distributing them judiciously. During the morning hours he ran into Gatz-Brown.

"There you are, Carter, my boy," hailed the manipulator. "Ever on the wing, I see. You must quit this and come out for an afternoon behind Tinkling Chimes, my new pacer. Ah, you youngsters! You will learn the value of conservatism some day."

"I'd like to go," said Carter abstractedly, "but I've a big undertaking on at present."

"Well, well," returned Gatz-Brown, chuckling cheerfully. "I suppose you must have your fling. Good luck to you, my boy."

Closing quotations on Saturday showed X. Y. Z. up to par, and the unwonted move attracted some interest. Carter, who knew what to expect, had observed indications of considerable secret buying of the stock. He was not the only one to whom the tip had been passed.

Early on Monday X. Y. Z. moved to 102. Carter was watching the board at Lesser's when the figures ran from beneath the chalk. He dashed out into the maelstrom of Wall Street. Dodging and squirming, he reached Weldstone's. There he negotiated with his credit slip and turned anxiously to the ticker in the inner office. Weldstone was absent at the Exchange. X. Y. Z. was climbing. Suddenly it jumped to 107. Carter sought the clerk and signed away the last thousand dollars which he had kept in reserve as margin. Then he hurried into the street, without another glance at the ticker.

He lacked the courage to stay or to return to

Lesser's. He let the crowd whirl him this way and that, retaining his cool, self-possessed pose through force of habit, but inwardly helpless in a gyrating confusion of brain. Had he missed? Had he read Gatz-Brown aright? Or had he merely bungled his own play by haste? He found himself outside the Exchange and stood staring at it. For nearly an hour he remained there with vacant, unseeing eyes.

When he finally pulled himself together a sense of the situation swept over him and he was seized with a pressing instant need to know, to end the uncertainty. In his agitation he passed a dozen offices where he might have found what he wanted and headed for Weldstone's. He had his foot on the lower step when an orotund thunderbolt crashed into him and he held to a fat arm to avoid being hurled to the gutter. He was about to dodge away with an exclamation when he caught a glimpse of a flaring tie.

"Great fish hooks, man!" a thin voice was wheezing at him. "What's the hurry? It's all over."

"What's happened, Weldstone?" cried Carter. "I've been out of it." The broker gurgled and mopped his shiny head.

"Not much," he answered, "only the bottom's dropped out of X. Y. Z. It went from 107 to 86. I've made nearly a hundred thousand."

Carter presented himself at the office of Gatz-Brown after the market closed with X. Y. Z. at 84. The Virginian had covered himself at 85, well content. The financier looked up at him with an expectant smile.

"Well, my boy," he said cheerfully, "such are the chances of the game."

"Quite so," assented Carter gravely.

"I understand you were in pretty heavily."

"Not so heavily as I could have wished."

"Eh?"

"I was selling," said Carter casually. He waited a moment, then bending closer he added: "By the way, how is that brother-in-law of yours you were telling me about the other day?"

Gatz-Brown looked thoughtful for the space of some three seconds, a fact afterward treasured by the Virginian. It was the only known occasion upon which the financier allowed himself to be seen stripped of his smile. There was a new expression in the eye he turned toward Carter with a redeeming chuckle.

"Well," he said, accepting the situation with full comprehension, "I can only repeat that invitation as to Tinkling Chimes."

CHAPTER VII

A SUFFIXED VICTORY

THE first intimation of trouble with Bonsart came while those who were to make up the cast of Mrs. Jimmy Hope's charity play were gathered in the ballroom of the Hope home. Carter, picked for one of the lesser parts, was chatting with the hostess where she sat at the piano, running her fingers lightly over the keys. The director, an important, chubby little man, was bustling about with chairs and couches, arranging his setting, a bundle of manuscript serving in lieu of baton as he gave orders to the young men who were aiding him.

Sauntering steps passed behind Carter, who was leaning easily at the side of the keyboard. Across the casual converse which the Virginian was holding with the charming young woman there drifted two phrases:

“Who is this fellow Carter? It seems to me you're taking a lot about him on faith.”

Carter's gaze was on Mrs. Hope's face. She returned his look with a calm smile, rippling idly into the treble. He waited until the steps had echoed down the room, then shot a quick glance over his



SAUNTERING STEPS PASSED BEHIND CARTER, WHO WAS LEANING
EASILY AT THE SIDE OF THE KEYBOARD.—*Page 100.*

shoulder. The man who had spoken was Neville Bonsart, whom he remembered for a chilly stare and the monocle habit. The one to whom he was speaking was Stilbert, one of the youngest of the set in which he moved. Carter knew that the voice could not have been Stilbert's. He turned back to Mrs. Hope with an unspoken question.

Of all the persons with whom he had come in contact during his slow struggle toward the social citadel he felt that this woman, scarcely more than a girl, the central figure in his first Fifth Avenue adventure, had the truest knowledge of his purpose and character. Perhaps it was this fact that had led him to avoid using her deliberately in any of his subsequent plans. Not that he feared her; rather he respected her intelligence and the insight that weighed him correctly while according him his due. It was the greater source of satisfaction to him that she frequently gave him a foothold in his ascent unasked and unsought, as in the present case of the society play. He awaited her comment now with mute appeal to their common understanding.

"You must have been prepared for something of this kind," she said.

"Yes," he answered slowly; "if you mean in my general consciousness. I have known all along that there would be interference at some stage, possibly at several stages."

"It was inevitable," she nodded. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I hardly see my way yet. He is too powerful a

factor to be overlooked. I wonder how long this has been going on."

"To my knowledge for a week at least. Since he was introduced to you at the Bidwells' last bridge party."

"He has standing."

"And a sharp tongue."

"What does he want?"

"You do Neville an injustice," she smiled again. "He wants nothing from any man or woman except recognition of his own essential superiority and the conduct of their affairs according to his own personal ideas. To be happy he must occupy the censor's office, free to pass judgment upon all things. He is tiresome, but he is listened to."

"What has he been saying?"

"He has discovered that you have no visible claim upon the section of society which he has taken under his own wing. He is unable to see that you are entitled to a place."

"If he were really in earnest he could do for me in short order," said Carter thoughtfully.

"No; hardly as bad as that. You have gone too far, I think. But he could make himself very dangerous."

"Is he brilliant?"

"Rather stupid, I should say. A remarkable person for fixed ideas. Even something of a fanatic in his way."

"Is he wealthy?"

"Abominably. He gives the most exquisite dinners

in his ancient family stronghold. The Bonsarts are original New Yorkers, you know. They say that to be included in his circle of epicures is 'better than a patent of nobility. Absurd, isn't it?"

"A cad?"

"Far from it. I have seen him do generous things. He is susceptible to good qualities in others, particularly if they fall in with his own peculiar notion of manners. 'Knightly' is a pet word with him. Do you perceive the significance of it?"

Carter reflected. He began to have some conception of the temper of this expected, yet unexpected, antagonist.

"Then if I could win him he might perhaps repair what damage he has done me?"

"With interest, probably."

"First scene, ladies and gentlemen! We will now begin the rehearsal of the first scene." The director was waving his manuscript at them with lofty gesture.

They left the piano together and walked toward the buzzing group. Bonsart noted their approach. He turned an inquiring and insolent gaze upon the young Virginian. Carter ignored it, but felt it. Decidedly the problem grew serious.

During the rehearsal he carefully avoided Bonsart and refrained from unnecessary words with any one, guarding his every action with the most scrupulous care. He could afford no mistake with a captious enemy present. Until it was time to tame this opponent, as he must if he would proceed toward success, it should be his to avoid the shadow of offense.

Meanwhile, he kept a watchful eye upon the other. As a result he came to the conclusion that Bonsart's enmity was not yet malignant. As far as he might judge, he was not the object of any further secret attack that afternoon.

The Virginian mapped his tactics with keen attention to details. Heretofore every ruse in his campaign had been conducted against passively resisting obstacles, tradition, accepted conventions, pride of wealth and rank, exclusiveness, the hedged in circles of the purple clad. His advance had been made by mires, countermines, ambuscades, surprises, maneuvers, upon which he need not embark if he would not. Now, suddenly, he was thrown upon the defensive. Here was definite, well directed opposition. An active adversary was in the field to dispute his further passage, even to hurl him back from what he had gained. Precision and caution must be his watchwords.

He noticed that at the close of each rehearsal Bonsart and one or two of the other young men usually walked down to the Waldorf for a drink. He considered these companions of the ill-disposed aristocrat. He could count upon none of them as a sure friend, although he knew all of them fairly well. Going over the list he finally selected Ivan Dorling as the one best suited to his purpose. Dorling was the only son of an immensely wealthy mining man. His own acceptance in New York was not of ancient date. Carter had cultivated him to some extent and had remarked the freedom with which he dispensed large sums of money. It was his own cynical guess that

this characteristic of Dorling's had recommended him more than any other for social recognition. For the rest he knew him as an easy, friendly boy, good-natured to a fault and well disposed toward himself.

The charity play was nearly ready for its first performance when Carter found the setting right for his own private histrionic effort. Bonsart and Dorling were walking down Fifth Avenue from the Hopes' one pleasant afternoon. The Virginian followed them unobserved. Entering the Thirty-third Street entrance to the Waldorf he came around into the café a few moments later to find the two seated at a table over their glasses. As Carter had been sure he would, Dorling hailed and invited him to join. Bonsart was cold and distant and the conversation was carried on by the other two. The Virginian found ample matter for comment in the approaching play, and Dorling joined him readily in the discussion. The time passed smoothly in spite of Bonsart's frigidity. Carter glanced at his watch presently.

"Half-past three," he exclaimed. "Now, that's annoying. Past banking hours. I am in a mess."

"What's wrong, old chap?" asked Dorling with ready sympathy.

"Why, I can't imagine how it came to slip my mind. I had a very important transaction on this afternoon that depended upon a cash loan, and now I've missed my broker."

"Come, that's too bad! Can't it be remedied?" asked Dorling. The Virginian caught the curl on Bonsart's lip as he listened.

"Why, yes. It could be," said Carter, with an embarrassed smile. "Are you in a position to lend me \$5,000 as a very especial favor?"

Dorling's checkbook and fountain pen came to light promptly. Carter was conscious of a little twinge of regret that he was not in a position to profit by this complacent generosity. But he was after larger game.

"Five thousand, you said?"

"That will do, yes. Thanks awfully."

The check was filled and signed. Carter folded it and tucked it in his pocket.

"This is a great favor, Dorling. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment I'll make my arrangements by telephone."

Carter never knew exactly what passed in his absence until some time afterward, though he counted confidently from his knowledge of the two men upon a scene almost identical with the one that actually occurred. The Virginian had scarcely passed into the corridor when Bonsart was upon Dorling hammer and tongs.

"So this gentleman adventurer has strung you up like all the rest, has he?" he demanded scornfully. "Oh, he's a clever young manipulator; there's not a doubt of it."

"Why, what's wrong with him?" asked Dorling in surprise.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. Only you can say good-by to your five thousand. He's simply played you in first-class style. I wondered where the chap

got his capital and his assurance. It's clear as day now."

"Well, why shouldn't I lend him the money?" asked Dorling, uneasily. Bonsart held up both hands.

"Why, indeed, good youth—why, indeed?" he mocked. "Unless one cares to consider the fact that you will never see it again there is no reason under the sun why you shouldn't lend it to him."

"Well, he's a good fellow," returned Dorling. "He probably needs the money."

Bonsart stared a moment at the simplicity of the answer, and then fell to laughing.

"You've hit it there, my boy. He surely does need it. And just as surely he's a good fellow, as you say." Then his mood veered suddenly. He leaned toward the other with serious face.

"Look here, Dorling; I don't like to see you victimized. This man is nothing but a common grafted, and how he made his way into such circles as the Hopes and the Bidwells gather about them is more than I can see. What does he call himself? Robert Carter. Who ever heard of Robert Carter? He says he comes from Virginia, but there are no Carters down there that I know of. Now I've watched him, and he's just shown me his game, cards up. I'm going to uproot him. It's a shame and a scandal that we are open to the devices of low adventurers of which he is the type. Some one must keep an eye open for such people, and now that I have proof I'm going after him."

"Oh, come," returned Dorling. "You're preju-

diced. He's an awfully decent chap. I don't grudge him the money."

"You make me tired. Are you fond of playing the easy fool to such a man? At least follow my advice; it can do no harm. When he returns ask him when you can expect repayment or how long he will need the money, or some such question. It is perfectly proper, even supposing that the loan was asked in good faith."

"I hate to," said Dorling, squirming.

"Now, do as I say. I want to show you the fellow as he is. You'll catch him off his guard and we can use the incident as a club to beat loose his hold."

"Well," returned Dorling, reluctantly, "if you think it will be all right."

"All right? Of course it will. You'll see him on tenterhooks."

Carter was absent about fifteen minutes. He could not count upon the success of the stratagem he had planned, but he was reasonably sure that Bonsart would induce Dorling to arrange some test of his good faith. As he read the young man of the monocle he must inevitably take a hand in an affair that did not concern him in the least and seek to manage it to his own satisfaction. Hostility to the Virginian would do the rest.

"It's all right," said Carter cheerfully, re-entering the café. "I'm immensely obliged to you, Dorling. Let's have a drink," and he called the waiter. After the orders had been given he glanced at the two men. They had not spoken yet. Something was in the air.

"By the way," said Dorling suddenly, in a voice

that he strove to make matter-of-fact and off-hand, "I've become rather methodical lately in business matters. Gone in for bookkeeping and all that sort of thing, you know. When can I expect repayment, if you don't mind, Carter?" With flushed face he drew a notebook from his pocket and poised a pencil.

The Virginian took a breath for inward satisfaction. This was positively too simple. It gave him the whip hand without an effort. Meanwhile, his face went stern under Dorling's words. He looked at the young man intently a moment and then whipped out the check.

"Right now, my dear fellow," he answered quietly, and pushed the slip across the table toward Dorling. There was not the slightest hint of pique in his gesture or expression. His attitude was merely that of a superior mind subjected to misunderstanding. Bonsart was watching him closely. Dorling's embarrassment was painful.

"Oh, really, Carter, old chap, I didn't mean it that way. I was just making a feeble effort to be exact, you know. The governor's been after me time and again about such things."

"It's all right, my dear boy, all right. I'm not offended, not in the least. You're quite right," said Carter, soothingly. The tone, such a one as he might have used with a blundering child, completed Dorling's confusion.

"Carter, you must take it. I insist. Really, I shall have to regard it as a personal reflection if you refuse.

I ask you as a favor, old chap. Do take it back, there's a good fellow."

Carter smiled upon him calmly.

"Oh, very well, if you insist." He took the check from Dorling's offering hand, sensing rather than seeing the triumphant flash in Bonsart's eye. "Let's say no more about it," he continued, and with the words he tore the check across, tore it again and reduced it to tiny fragments, which he dropped to the floor. The gesture was absolutely free from a trace of the dramatic. It was merely casual.

"As you were saying, Dorling," he said, closing the incident with the firm, sure grip of one who is used to setting people at their ease in any situation, "the director has managed the little play excellently. Unless I quite forget everything he has taught me I positively feel I shall be a credit to him with my little three lines."

Dorling recovered awkwardly. Carter had rattled on for some minutes before he was able to respond. The Virginian was wholly unconscious, at his ease, the man of the world who cannot be placed at a loss or in the wrong.

Subtly he emphasized the absence of sulkiness or resentment from his manner. Delicately he conveyed the impression that his one idea was to relieve Dorling courteously from all embarrassment proceeding from an ill-considered act. The audience he was playing to was Bonsart. He could read Dorling with one glance. The boy was his creature from that moment if he so wished.

Bonsart's face was a study. Schooled to reserve and self-command though he was, he could not keep some trace of his surprise and change of feeling from showing. Watch as he might, there was no false note in the Virginian. Word and act were those of the truest gentleman. As Carter had figured from the outline picture of the man's character supplied by Mrs. Hope, the affair had an irresistible appeal for him. He could not argue against his convictions. Affecting precise notions of conduct, he found Carter perfect, conforming to his own ideals. Slowly he readjusted his ideas about this stranger.

But Carter was minded to force home his advantage. For some time he had contemplated a certain incidental move in his scheme of advance, and he saw now the way in which it could be made of service, immediate and future. He checked his flow of small talk with another glance at his watch.

"I say, isn't it about time for Mrs. Pulsain to be found in the tea-room? Let's wander in there and look for her. This is rather dull."

The others assented readily, and they passed down the corridor. They found Mrs. Pulsain as the Virginian had suggested. She was with Mrs. Gatz-Brown, and the young men joined them at their table. The chatter of the hour engaged them, and Carter's sparkling wit kept him continually, though not obtrusively, forward.

By deft management he then gradually led the conversation to a point where he had Mrs. Pulsain for vis-à-vis, and the other three formed a second

group, one of those divisions that fall naturally when four or more persons are together. His immediate purpose was to tune the talk to the personal note, a matter which could not be naturally or gracefully adjusted in the general flow of comment. Since the incident at the Gatz-Brown summer home the Virginian had been conscious of Mrs. Pulsain's interest in him. He could understand her feeling. He had shown himself polished and clever, yet withal a somewhat mysterious figure in the world of which he appeared to be a part. He had meant to clear that mystery before her October reception, and there was no time so propitious as the present.

"I hear you highly commended for your work in Mrs. Hope's play," said Mrs. Pulsain. "It is even intimated, at the risk of causing trouble, that you should have been cast for a more important part."

Carter laughed the compliment aside.

"I'm afraid my friend the director has been doing me this unfriendly office," he said. "I suppose he detected some superficial indications that I had trod the boards before."

"Oho! You have performed for the groundlings, then?"

"Merely as an amateur, in Virginia."

"Wonders on wonders! First a yachtsman, now a thespian! How did you happen to transfer your talents to New York, Mr. Carter?"

"Would you like to hear a dull but brief account of that operation, Mrs. Pulsain? I warn you that it will include a revelation of deceit and perfidy."

"Two things that I particularly adore," she retorted. "Let us have the story, by all means."

"I have never told this before, but to whom should I confess if not to my mentor and guide?" he said, recalling their previous understanding with a smile. "My qualifications must have been examined at some time, and I can think of no more kindly eye than your own to scan them."

He could see that the others were lending ear to what he said while continuing their own chatter perfunctorily.

"Family reverses before my father's death left me a paternal estate, the visible assets of which were a crop of mortgages, three chests full of papers in inconceivable confusion, and the promise of lengthy litigation," he went on. "I did not care for the prospect. I determined to come to New York. Meanwhile, I had no friends in the North. On impulse I decided to leave my name out of the situation, since if I bore it I might be led to expect aid from it and suffer accordingly."

Bonsart's glance was turned toward him expectantly.

"So I came here as plain Robert Carter, incognito, as it were, to see what I could see."

"Well," said Mrs. Pulsain, "this is thrilling. What next?"

"That's all, dear madam. Am I to be forgiven?"

"But if you're not Robert Carter, who are you?"

"My own name is Robert Pendleton Carteret," he answered.

"Dear me. How romantic. Oh, folks—people," she called to the others, though there was no need, for all had heard. "I have an acquaintance here that I would like to present to you. Mrs. Gatz-Brown, Mr. Dorling, Mr. Bonsart, allow me to introduce Mr. R. Pendleton Carteret, late of Virginia."

Carter arose and bowed a trifle ceremoniously, yet with an air of gaiety that relieved the situation. The affair was explained with laughing questions and quiet replies.

"Quite a sensation, I declare," said Mrs. Gatz-Brown. "Are we authorized to give this out, Mr. Carteret?"

"You will assist me if you will allow me to bear my patronymic hereafter," responded the Virginian lightly.

Bonsart was quite vanquished. The flavor of old world adventure in Carter's concealment of name, the old world suggestion in the name itself, the explanation of the handsome young man's presence in New York, coming pat upon the affair of the check, completely won his admiration. He extended his hand impulsively and shook that of the Virginian, murmuring congratulations upon his having resumed his proper colors. As the party were leaving the hotel to enter Mrs. Pulsain's automobile a few moments later he dropped back with Carter.

"I say, Carteret, have dinner with me to-night, won't you, old fellow?"

CHAPTER VIII

A CUTLASS IN HAND

"YOU'RE a queer chap, Carteret. What under the sun makes you think you're going on the Water Kelpie?"

Bidwell wore an expression of skeptical good humor as he watched the Virginian. He had an almost abnormal respect for this young man and for his capabilities. He had gaged him with his own quiet accuracy of judgment and had found him shrewd and able. More than all else, he had had a personal demonstration of Carter's intelligence. But the young man's intimation that he meant to be one of a very especially select company soon to leave for a month's cruise on Calvin Stanhope's yacht seemed mere boastful extravagance.

"Why," said Carter coldly, "do you see any particular reason why I shouldn't?"

"No, my dear fellow, not the slightest reason. But you haven't been invited."

"I shall be."

Bidwell shrugged his shoulders, smiling. "I like your complete confidence in that desirable consummation. Incidentally, if I were close to Stanhope my-

self you should have had your invitation anyway. But I'm a parvenu in that crowd myself."

Carter smiled back. He did not resent Bidwell's plain acceptance of R. Pendleton Carteret as a parvenu. He understood Bidwell perfectly and occasionally dropped the mask in his presence. The insurance president rested under heavy debt to him and had remained his unreserved friend in spite of that fact.

"I know you would have aided me if you could," he answered, "and it's quite clear to me that the presence of Mrs. Bidwell and yourself on that craft represents years of patient preparation. You naturally doubt that I, not nearly so well equipped as yourself, should count upon entering Stanhope's charmed circle."

"A perfectly natural doubt, you'll admit," said the other, rapping on the table to call the attention of a passing waiter.

"Then you can see no possible opening for me?"

"Absolutely none, Carteret, if you want me to be quite frank. Without any desire to discourage your laudable ambition or to reflect undue credit upon myself, Stanhope's cruises are things to marvel and wonder at. There are always just so many guests on board, of just such a character, picked, so the stories go, as an artist might weave colors or compose a bouquet of flowers, with studied care as to the complementary and contrasting qualities of the various individuals. A sort of social epicurean dream. The masterly picking and choosing is said to make

the voyagers delightfully congenial, and it's certain that there's not a soul in New York who won't jump at the chance to go. No one is out of place, no one is left over, and no one is lacking for any of the entertainments and amusements with which Stanhope so cleverly passes the time."

"And he's all filled up for this one," said Carter, reflectively.

"The invitations were out last week. There are to be fourteen in all. Husbands with their wives account for eight, and the gathering is really remarkable."

"I know—you told me. The three remaining men are Bascom, Little and Stuyver, bachelors all. And still I say that I shall be one of that same remarkable gathering."

Bidwell felt there was small profit in carrying the discussion further. The thing was simply impossible, and if Carteret chose to think he could do it, well, what matter?

"Still unconvinced? I'll give you a chance to back your view of it," laughed the Virginian.

"I shouldn't care to rob you," returned Bidwell.

"Don't mention it, old fellow. Come, are you with me for a thousand?"

"If you press me I'll say done."

"Done it is," said Carter, and they shook on it.

"Now, I expect a little help," continued Carter. "Nothing that will place your wager in jeopardy. But really if I'm going to be along with you for a month I must have something to wear, and it may be

that I can only join you at the last moment. All I want you to do is to include a trunk of mine with your baggage. No, I don't mean to crawl inside it."

"I admire the way you have of still taking it for granted that you're coming," said Bidwell, with a laugh. "I wonder what Stanhope would say to hear you talking? But there's no trouble about the trunk. We'll fix that easily. Perhaps you might be kind enough to send the key along. I might be able to use the contents myself, and it would be too bad to have your outfit idle."

"Don't you worry about my outfit. I'm going to use that myself. I'll let you know when to expect the trunk and send it around. Good-by."

Carter knew Stanhope slightly and liked him. He hoped to know him better, for the Stanhopes were the leaders of a set he had never been able to enter. Robert Carter, now these several months in full bloom as R. Pendleton Carteret, was well and favorably known in many desirable quarters. He was comfortably settled in modest but presentable bachelor apartments, and was no longer in the position of the adventuring outlaw who sallies abroad with hungry glance and ready weapon in search of a chance windfall. He was safely ensconced part way up the side of the bristling galleon that is society. But he had gone so far only to find unsuspected and hidden barriers that must still be passed before he could win aloft.

Mrs. Pulsain, a mighty ally in his campaigns, could not aid him with the Stanhopes. They were not of

her group, which was rather of the newer financial and industrial fortunes. While she herself was sufficiently well placed to have been one of them, she had become the leader of a set apart from theirs, where ancient lineage and landed estates were accorded more weight.

Calvin Stanhope was a pleasant-spoken, well-mannered man, of the youthfully bald type, with an engaging smile and a mobile mouth. Carter had met him at the New York Yacht Club, whither he sometimes went with Percival Champney. With what tact and shrewdness he might he had tried to cultivate Stanhope, but with small success. Whether it was that the man was conscious of the Virginian's artificial claim to distinction or whether it was merely the calm indifference to further acquaintance of one whose present resources in all things are sufficient, Carter could not tell. His shafts, cleverly directed to excite interest in himself, rattled idly against the yachtsman's polished armor. Yet with all his reserve Stanhope remained likable and most courteous. He was quite lacking in insolence or the air of being on his guard.

At a later meeting with Stanhope in the club Carter tried again. In the interval he had studied yachting and things thereto appertaining with his wonderful facility for grasping and assimilating series of facts. As a result he met with slightly more encouragement. He attacked Stanhope through his foible. It was hard to know where the yachtsman ceased to be merely habitually decent and began really

to notice—so hard, in fact, that it was almost a matter of instinct. Still, as they sat chatting casually with Champney and others in the balustraded niche at the top of the wide marble staircase, Carter began to feel that he had at least identified himself in Stanhope's mind, attaching his face, name and some impression that he was not wholly impossible to the other's consciousness. This was something, if he could find a way to improve it.

And then it was, in the course of the talk, that he learned of Stanhope's coming cruise in his new yacht, the Water Kelpie. Having learned from Bidwell who were to form the company he examined the possibilities. Shortly afterward he formed the audacious resolve which took Bidwell so by surprise.

On the morning after the conversation with Bidwell, Carter presented himself at the office of Gatz-Brown in Wall Street, where of late he had been something of a stranger. The financier hailed him warmly.

“There you are, Carter, my boy. Hold on. Carteret is the proper word now, eh? Coming up fast, aren't you? Glad to see you. Sit down.”

“Thanks, Mr. Gatz-Brown. How are the trotters?”

“Pacers, my boy, pacers. I haven't driven a trotter in three months. Pacers for me every time. I've got the best stable on Long Island, even if you won't come to see it. But what can I do for you?”

“I've come to ask a favor, Mr. Gatz-Brown.”

“Favor, eh?” returned the other, eying him keenly,

but chuckling all over his rotund little body. "Come, now, Carteret, you played it pretty low on the old man last time you flaunted your pennon in these parts. Turned the double cross on him, by George! Seems to me you've got a well developed nerve to come around asking favors."

"I don't expect to get any," said the Virginian boldly, with his open smile, "but that doesn't keep me from asking. And what you've just said is my best reason for asking. You'd rather help a man when you know what he's done than when you've got him checked up as a question mark. However, this isn't an affair by which I propose to profit directly."

"Philanthropic, eh?"

"Not exactly. Is Bertrand Bascom still nursing Hicksville and Great Eastern?"

"Nursing it? That's good. That's Bascom's way, all right; he's the fussy nursemaid for you when he's got anything on. Yes," he added with sudden caution, "I believe he's still pretty much interested in Hicksville and Great Eastern. Why?"

"It wouldn't be hard for you to nod your head in the direction of that stock and make it look as if it had a self-induced attack of delirium tremens, would it?"

"Come, Carter, get to the point. What are you gunning for?"

"I'm gunning for Bascom."

"Well, let's hear the scheme."

The Virginian described the whole plan, briefly and

frankly, while Gatz-Brown fumbled with the papers on his desk, smiles and frowns alternating on his face.

"Lord, what cheek you have to come bothering me with such things!" he snapped finally.

"Yes and no," returned Carter calmly. "What difference does it make to you? The market is like a harp of a thousand strings to you. I've watched you. You play for the enjoyment of the game. It's business, yes, but pleasure, too. You've got imagination. The harmony you draw from the thing is the total result of your various manipulations. You can just as well include the Hicksville and Great Eastern in your next symphony; it's just another string to pluck."

Gatz-Brown stared a little. Here was surely a novel view of the grind of stock market affairs. But the Virginian knew his man, knew him as he made a point of knowing all with whom he came in contact. There was a streak of sentiment in the little financier, and the figure appealed to him. Privately he had always liked to think that the ledger balance of his operations was not the sum and total of his business life.

"You see, Mr. Gatz-Brown, I'm not trying to coin the thing. I'm not asking you to put it up or put it down. All I ask is that you pick it up and use it in some way; you can make it pay as well as anything else," Carter wound up.

Gatz-Brown reflected, with his dancing eyes upon his visitor. "Strange what a hold you have over me, Carteret. Here you are trifling with a busy man over some kind of horse play, and instead of sending

you about your business I suppose I'll have to do what you ask."

"I'll be eternally grateful," ventured Carter.

"Damn your gratitude," said the other briskly. "I'll do what you ask. But no tricks, now. No tricks."

"Not a trick, I solemnly vow," said Carter, as he took his leave.

His next visit in the financial district was to his old friend Weldstone, who greeted him warmly. Carter explained his wants once more, and the broker agreed to help him as far as possible. Weldstone also undertook to drop some comments where a Wall Street publication would be likely to pick them up. With that his preliminary plan was as well laid as he could hope.

The whole affair was as purely gambling as anything he had ever put his hand to, but the Virginian was used to taking chances. It was now the tenth of October. The Water Kelpie was to steam with her company on the twelfth. As part of his stake in the game Carter made a trip down the Long Island shore and purchased an old gasolene oyster boat. Not a craft to awaken a thrill of pride in the yachtsman's breast was his new acquisition. Broad in the beam and broad in the nose, utilitarian, vulgar and noisy, she could do no better than six knots at her best. The fact that she had been newly painted white and that her engine was in fairly good shape were her best points to her new owner.

On the morning of October 12 Carter sent his trunk

to Bidwell's home and later called the insurance president on the telephone.

"Still coming, Carteret?"

"I'll be with you."

"Shall we hold the Water Kelpie at the pier?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there in time. I hope you have the thousand with you."

As Carter headed out along the south shore in his oyster boat on the afternoon of the twelfth he amused himself with an armful of the evening newspapers. All of them contained mention of mysterious rumors concerning Hicksville and Great Eastern. For some months the stock had been inactive, but with the opening of the market two days before it had jumped up three points. Later it had fallen six, to recover in a wholly inexplicable fashion. Talk of approaching dividend conflicted with prediction of a bad traffic statement, and Wall Street had hatched a brood of its strange tales, to the great delight of the paragraphers.

It had been a windy, early fall, and Carter had counted upon weather favoring his purpose. As night drew in a fresh southeast breeze sent the old oyster boat wallowing heavily, and Carter headed back before it. He wished to be able to face the sea somewhere off Long Beach. After a time he picked up the lights of Coney Island. It was hazy to windward, but a luminous bank of clouds overhead made the surrounding expanse clear enough. To the south the long, powerful bulk of an ocean liner, studded with twinkling points, swept in toward the Narrows. An-

other was coming from further east. Two ocean-going tugs conveying a massive clump of lighters plunged sullenly and ponderously outward. He glanced at his watch by the glow of his cigar. It was eight o'clock. By this time he thought the Water Kelpie should have left her dock.

His craft heaved and squattered among the waves like a hen in the sand. Her engine pounded on industriously, missing fire with amiable regularity. It came cold, and Carter had recourse to an overcoat of ancient vintage which he had had the forethought to bring. He made a nest for himself near the wheel with an old awning dragged from a cubby hole, and smoked cigars chain fashion. He would have a pleasant outing of it for his thousand-odd dollars and his trouble, if nothing more.

He ran in well past Rockaway, then turned once more. The southeast breeze was snoring comfortably, and the oyster boat staggered into it without too much effort. It occurred to him that with the direction of the wind it would be better to keep to the south, and he altered his course a little. He shipped a sea or two in the process, and began to find the adventure not so free from spice. About this time he began to watch the stretch behind him toward the harbor.

It was well past ten o'clock and he was chilled, hungry and far from confident when he caught the red, green and masthead lights of a vessel slipping up from the rear, about a mile away. He sheered off south again. Soon he made out the glow of her starboard ports. She came on swiftly. As he watched

anxiously, he suddenly became aware that he had mis-judged her course in the obscurity, and as a result of the loss of the sense of distance and direction due to his position close to the water level, the Water Kelpie, if it were she, would pass fully a quarter of a mile inshore from him. He headed about desperately, taking the sweep of the waves and soaked with sheeting spray.

He raised a shout, but the wind drowned his voice. The oyster boat struggled laboriously on with her waddling gait. He understood, now, that his plan had gone awry. There was no possibility of closing the gap. He was caught in a situation that was as ludicrous as it was futile. Again he raised a cry. The vessel was nearly abreast of him, and he could make out the graceful outlines of a yacht, cabin ports brilliantly illuminated. He climbed to the little strip of deck forward, tore loose his one battered oil lamp and waved it wildly. Next moment even that failed him, for the light went out. He sat down sullenly on his bundle of awning.

The yacht had passed when he sprang suddenly to renewed action. He caught up a wrench and knocked a flimsy locker door to splinters. Then he rolled the newspapers into a loose bundle, thrust them on to his little forward deck and weighted them against the wind with fragments. He was duly thankful that he was not dependent upon matches. His pocket cigar lighter was at hand, and in a moment he had kindled the paper at a dozen points. Still holding to the flapping papers that the breeze threatened to tear from

him, he kicked in the panel of another locker and added the splintered pieces. The flames flickered, flared and suddenly broke out wildly. He added more fuel, feeding the locker doors.

He left the fire and picked up the useless lamp. He knocked out the glass, flattened the sides and stood with the reflector held back of the blaze, playing the rays as best he might toward the yacht, which was now well out from him. His own craft held its course inshore slowly, and the wind kept the shower of sparks clear of her over the bow. The gasolene tank was safe, well aft. He had no intention of allowing the fire to get beyond possible control unless his plan should not work. But in this, as in all things, he put forth every resource that came to his hand.

Blinded by the fierce, leaping light, he could only penetrate the darkness ahead by running to the stern and shielding his eyes. He could see no alteration in the yacht's course. He hurried back to the fire and resumed signaling with his makeshift reflector. Then, with a throaty whoop that set his pulses jumping, the yacht's whistle sounded. Instantly he stepped back to the engine and slowed it to the last speed.

The forward deck was all ablaze now, but he paid no attention to it. Out at the stern he could see that the yacht had swung widely to the south and was traveling at reduced speed abreast of him. After five minutes of waiting he decided to stop his engine altogether, taking a chance that the wind would not swing the craft head to. Then he caught a glimpse of a white object part way between himself and the yacht.

He pulled the flooring aside, tied a stout cord around the plug in the bottom, which he loosened with his boot heel, and waited.

The forward half of the oyster boat was burning when Carter, peering through the darkness, pulled loose the plug. Then he stripped off his overcoat and perched well out on the stern. The wind caught him, and his craft had swung into a dangerous position, with the sparks showering about the engine, when he made out a six-oared surf boat skimming toward him. Never was a more thrilling rescue. The oyster boat was plunging and wallowing helplessly, a foot of water in her.

Just as Carter, pulled by friendly hands, stumbled into the surf boat the blazing craft swung head to the wind and a horizontal sheet of flame swept full upon the men. The boatswain's shout was not needed to warn the crew of the danger of the gasoline. Thrusting off quickly they laid to their oars and started back to the yacht. Behind them the old oyster boat, in the grip of the fire from stem to stern, lit the widening space. Apparently the rising water had protected the fuel tank.

"A close squeak, sir," said the boatswain, who stood at the tiller.

"You may well say so," returned Carter. "What ship is that?"

"The Water Kelpie, sir. Mr. Stanhope's yacht."

When they reached the vessel the Virginian sprang lightly to the lowered gangway. Curious faces lined the rail above him. At the top of the steps stood

Stanhope in yachting costume, with several men and women about him. He pressed forward as the rescued man stepped on deck.

"What happened?" he asked quickly. "My pilot seemed to think you set the fire yourself."

"So I did, Mr. Stanhope," returned Carter, quietly, stepping forward to where the light fell upon his face. "The engine had stopped and she was leaking badly, with a foot of water in her. I took the last chance I had."

"Well, I'm blessed," cried the other, peering at him and holding out a hand. "Isn't this—isn't this Mr. Carteret, whom I met at the yacht club?"

"The same," answered Carter, returning the hand-shake, while exclamations arose from all sides. "Sorry to have given you all this trouble, I'm sure. It all comes of trusting one's self so far out in an open launch."

Stanhope brushed the suggestion aside with laughing good nature. The women had withdrawn. He introduced the Virginian to the men, none of whom Carter knew personally. Bidwell was not in sight.

"Come on, Carteret; you must be frozen and starved. We'll have a little celebration of our timely arrival on the scene." Stanhope led the way to the forward deck house, into the smoking room, and gave quick orders to silent stewards. Carter told his story of danger and shipwreck over the glasses, told it extremely well. Stanhope and the others listened with interest and sympathy. The yachtsman watched the handsome, expressive face with approval.

"And now, Mr. Stanhope," said Carter at the end, "if it's not too much trouble, I'll ask you to put me off with the pilot. I can get back in the morning."

"Mr. Carteret," returned Stanhope courteously, "I have a very great favor to ask. I pride myself on arranging my cruises with great care. At the last minute one of my guests failed me—Bertrand Bascom—perhaps you know him. He most traitorously withdrew, sending word that tiresome stock complications would detain him. Now, see my predicament. We're off for a month, and here we are with a gap in the company. Most providentially, most happily, we take you off a burning launch. In return for that favor I must beg that you will accompany us."

"Now, that's very kind of you," answered Carter, returning Stanhope's smile. "But it would be poor return for your saving my life, I'm sure, to foist myself upon you."

"Tut, tut! I must really demand it, Carteret. Unless, of course, you have some absolutely necessary engagement ashore," pressed Stanhope warmly.

The Virginian was forced to admit that he had no such engagement.

"Then we'll call it settled," said Stanhope, beaming upon him. In the midst of the approving chorus a man stepped in from the deck and started on seeing the little tableau about the table.

"What's this I hear about a—" he began. Then: "Why, it's Carteret!"

The newcomer was Bidwell. He came forward with outstretched hand and a stare of amazement.

"Yes," cried Stanhope, as the two men shook hands, Carter smiling slyly at Bidwell, "and, what's more, he's going to be one of us."

"But what shall I do for clothes?" asked Carter, perplexed. Bidwell rose nobly to the situation, recovering with a gasp.

"Oh, don't worry about that, old man," he answered. "I've some extra duds along that will fit you perfectly."

"I begin to feel sorry for Bascom," said Carter.

CHAPTER IX

A PROFIT IN HEARTS

IT was not that the girl could not stir him, but that he would not let himself be stirred. So he told himself. Robert Carter, running the gantlet of many an opposing force in his lonely scaling of the social heights, knew the masked batteries, the ambuscades, the sudden dangers that lurked behind the eyes of the woman he should look seriously upon. And he would most carefully avoid them. Again, so he told himself.

In his capacity as R. Pendleton Carteret, beginning to be known as one of the handsomest and most presentable men about town, it was not surprising that he should seek to settle the matter offhand, once for all. He took a pardonable degree of pride in his ability to analyze his own affairs and the conduct of them. Throughout his remarkable advance upon the inner circle of society no one of his natural gifts had more surely contributed to his success than this, that he could turn a calm and critical eye upon himself at any moment. And as the eye had seen and the brain directed, so he had done.

Here, then, was the strange thing. He had taken

his decision to forget Marion Keith the night before, just as he would have decided to play a stock or cajole a friend or write a letter. And now it was the morrow and he had not forgotten. He saw her face peeping over his shoulder as he scowled at himself in the mirror. He saw it woven in the sunlight on the curtain and scrolled in the smoke from his morning cigarette. He shook his head, but still the face was there.

He gripped this weakness and held it. He had played at sentiment, played gracefully or eagerly or desperately as the conditions demanded. But at no moment had he been aware of more than an actor's sympathy with his part. In all matters he had ruled his own destiny, moving, speaking, even feeling at his own quiet demand. And here, here was treason in the camp.

But he had had warning; he was ready to admit that. It was the sure warning, a signal caught from the flash in her eyes, that had led to the resolve after he had parted from her last evening. The signal had told him enough. He must keep away.

It was a relief to remember that he was staying with the Percival Champneys at their Long Island home. The charm of life beneath that roof was that one need consult nothing beyond one's own whim for amusement. He was minded to get into the open with this little problem and fight it out. He dressed hurriedly in walking togs, passed others of the party on the veranda with a wave of his hand and struck into a steady stride along the highway.

The girl was Marion Keith, daughter of one of the oldest families of Manhattan, with a hereditary claim upon society which its modest fortune in real estate could never have won for it in latter days. Carter had known her five months, having met her at the Pulsains' and since then at many of the houses which were open to him. She and her mother frequently visited the Champneys, riding over from their own little summer cottage, ten miles to the north. He remembered now, with a sense of guilt at his blindness, that he had scarcely left her side during the evening before.

As he tramped he told himself at every step that it would never, never do. But the moment of self-revelation had left him distrustful, and he could not say it with conviction. He plodded on, arguing stubbornly. Never before had he been made to feel that he might let himself slip beyond control. The fight went its course as he covered mile after mile. Suddenly, with another shock, he looked about him to observe that all unconsciously he had taken the road toward her home. He smiled a little grimly at this discovery and went on toward the next bend in the road, promising himself with wholly foreign fury that he would turn back just short of the spot where he might glimpse the house. Decidedly, this was a matter calling for his best attention. Then he came to the turn, and she was there!

She was standing by the upturned hood of a rakish runabout, apparently contemplating murderous assault upon the engine with a formidable wrench.

There was indecision in her attitude and helplessness in her grasp of the clumsy implement, but her brows were drawn straight with firm resolve. He stood a moment, then came forward hastily.

"Please, the poor engine," he pleaded, "has it offended so seriously?"

"I did have designs upon it," she answered, looking up quickly, with quick comprehension and no vestige of surprise. "It's been misbehaving dreadfully."

Marion Keith made a wholly charming picture in her loose automobile coat, with the right sleeve rolled up to show a firm, white forearm, her cheeks healthily flushed and her chestnut hair tumbled by the wind into pleasing disorder. She was very young, but somehow she contrived in her manner and her conversation to avoid both youthfulness and precocity. Gray eyes sparkled now a moment, marking his amusement at the feminine attack upon things of iron and grease and power. Then a graver look came into them.

"It simply must be fixed in time to catch the afternoon train," she continued, bridging the unspoken part of further greeting. Carter recalled, with sudden uneasiness, that frequently with one another they overleaped the unnecessary.

"Do you know what's wrong?" he asked, stepping forward. She shook her head.

"It seemed to me that one of those bolt things was loose. I was going to tighten it."

He laughed and fumbled about the machinery for some minutes, then took a twist at the crank. The engine was obdurate. He repeated his unsuccessful

maneuvers, and then tried the tank. Seating himself comfortably on the step he looked up at her.

"It's a very simple matter, Miss Keith, but rather hopeless so far as the afternoon train is concerned. You've run out of gasolene."

"That's almost literally stupid, isn't it?" she said slowly, but there was the tangible presence of some more serious thought in her voice. She looked away over the fields absently.

"Must you catch that train?" he asked, taking in her motor garb. He was reconciled now to being with her, though something that thrilled within him would have laughed at the word *reconcile*.

"No, it's a letter," she said.

"Then that's all right. I can walk back in time to catch the evening train. The conductor will mail your letter in town."

"That's the strange thing," she answered after a pause. "In face of this providential breakdown I don't know whether I want to mail this absolutely essential letter. There's a paradox, if you like." But she did not smile. The shadow in her eyes was deeper, with, it seemed to him, just the faintest hint of appeal. Something was troubling her. As he looked he grew sure of it. Her face was pale and a little drawn. Then he, too, unmindful of caution, bridged the gap of convention and empty conversation.

"Is there—is there anything I can do?" He knew how awkward, how impertinent, even, the words must have sounded to a third person. But there was no

third person, and the words came without calculation. His resolve, his boasted reserve, all the logic of his struggle, vanished into thin air. He was leaning eagerly toward her. She showed no emotion, but studied him intently.

"Perhaps you can," she answered slowly.

"You may count upon me," he broke out earnestly. Cold reason was whispering to him that he was taking a dangerous step, dangerous to his great purpose and to his peace of mind. But cold reason had little chance just then, when the breeze sweeping up the road fluttered her cloak and made it seem as if she were swaying toward him. Still she studied him.

"It will seem incomprehensible, possibly, that I should tell you this"—she hesitated; it was not her way usually to hesitate—"but I think you will understand." There was a touch of wistfulness beneath her girlish dignity. He nodded quickly, sympathetically.

"When I was very young," she went on, "still in school, I wrote a very foolish note to a—to a man. It was a childish thing to do, but I did not know that it was—capable of misinterpretation." She flushed a little, and again Carter nodded.

"This morning I received a strange communication. It said that this foolish note of mine was in the writer's hands and intimated that it—it could be used against me. I was directed to answer to a box in the post-office. This is the answer that I was going to mail."

"How much did he want?"

Her color deepened. "Five thousand dollars."

"And you?"

"What could I do?" She made a little gesture of dependence. "I have no money, nor the means of getting it. I simply told them so."

"Them?"

"Oh, it could not be," she said quickly. "It would be impossible to believe that of him. Some one else has possession of the note."

"Have you told your mother?"

Her lips tightened. "If I could have seen my way to do so I should not have told you," she answered simply.

"Just one more question," he said, rising, conveying to her by his attitude more clearly than words would have done that he had accepted the trust she had offered him. "Who is the man you wrote that note to?"

She told him, and he recognized the name. Jerry Coskar had dazzled Wall Street and portions of Broadway with a brief, eccentric effulgence when he came into sole inheritance of a fortune a year before. Carter had heard of him of late in unsavory connection. The Virginian had not the slightest doubt that Coskar would sink to trading upon the unthinking confidences of a child's affection.

"You need think no more of it, Miss Keith," said Carter finally. "I will take the affair upon myself. I will walk back with you to your house and you can send some one for the machine." She nodded, and they made the journey almost in silence. The pros-

pect of action relieved him. His cold reason had little fault to find with the antics of that something else within his heart when he parted from her.

Carter took the late train to the city that evening and mapped out his plan during the ride. He must first find Coskar, track him to his quarters, learn his condition and see his companions. He must find some way to bring pressure upon him. It would not be difficult, if reports had been true. Then, suddenly, he remembered when he had last seen the wastrel and that Coskar had been in company with a man about whose figure he had noticed a touch of familiarity. That recollection blossomed now, for it came to him that the second man had been Arnold St. Geoffry.

Carter had never forgotten St. Geoffry. Since the frustrated elopement with Mrs. Champney the younger son of a fallen British house had played a very small and obscure part in the social world. Carter's private information was that St. Geoffry eked a precarious livelihood by despoiling the butterfly youth that could be brought fluttering to certain "card clubs." Meanwhile, he knew the Englishman for an unscrupulous schemer and his own implacable enemy. He returned the sentiment cordially. If St. Geoffry had a hand in this blackmailing plot, why, so much the better.

He took up his post opposite the likeliest "card club" about midnight, trusting that he might find one of the men he sought after the reaping of the nightly harvest. It was well into the morning, though still dark, when he saw St. Geoffry saunter down the

steps. The Englishman, in long black coat and opera hat, waited a moment in the street and was joined a minute later by another man similarly dressed, whom Carter recognized, with a sensation of triumph, as Jerry Coskar. The two walked eastward, in close converse, Carter following at a discreet distance. In the block between Lexington and Third Avenues they turned into an apartment house of very ordinary appearance.

The Virginian stepped to the opposite sidewalk and watched for a light to show. The front of the building remained blank. With a quick look up and down the empty street he crept down the basement steps. The door into the cellar was unlatched, and he passed through, feeling his way slowly along the rough stone walls, around empty barrels and piles of rubbish. Ten minutes of painful groping through the darkness brought him to the passage into the yard. Above, on the third floor, two windows showed lights.

With a light spring Carter caught the top of the fence and pulled himself up. It was the definite step into danger now. From this point he was nothing better than a burglar and must take his chances. But he meant to see the inside of that third floor apartment. Standing up and reaching out with his weight on the wall of the building he was able to catch the bars of the fire-escape. After a short struggle he stood on the little platform. Before going any farther he provided for retreat by unhooking the last iron ladder from

where it hung and placing it in position to the ground. Then he started to climb.

Crouched on the fire-escape landing at the third floor, Carter held himself well back and peered about the wall into the room. It was poorly furnished with chairs and a table covered with cheap baize, at which sat St. Geoffry and Coskar, facing each other. They had thrown aside overcoats and hats, but retained dress attire. They were bent close over several slips of paper. Coskar was figuring with a pencil. Between them was a little pile of bills and some silver. A gas jet flared overhead.

Carter's motive had been to identify the two men and their dwelling place beyond possibility of error. From that point he looked to be guided by chance, to either an opportunity to search their rooms or some kind of a clue to the whereabouts of the vital letter. He had not the slightest doubt that St. Geoffry had planned the blackmailing. He settled himself on the platform to watch for the remaining half hour before dawn.

St. Geoffry and Coskar were talking, but Carter could not catch their words. After a time Coskar pushed back his chair and waved a paper before the other with a gesture of finality. St. Geoffry nodded, rose, yawned and walked slowly to the window. Carter drew back to the verge of the platform. St. Geoffry's shadow fell across the bars almost at his feet; presently it moved away, and again he ventured a look.

Coskar had left the room. A faint glow through

a door at the opposite side showed a short hallway. St. Geoffry was slipping off his dress coat, pausing to yawn again in the operation. He hung the garment carefully over the back of a chair. Then he unbuttoned his waistcoat, took it off and threw it carelessly over the coat. He picked a cigarette from a box on the table, lighted it leisurely and went out into the hallway, turning into another room, the entrance to which was beyond Carter's vision.

The Virginian followed St. Geoffry's every movement and continued his inspection of the place with alert eyes. He could see nothing that might aid him. He held his post one minute, two minutes, then made ready to descend. As he turned away his glance fell upon St. Geoffry's waistcoat. It was folded over the chair, with the lining outward. The inner pocket was visible, and Carter could see that it was held together at the top with an ordinary safety-pin of large size.

His mind was still busy seeking adequate excuse for his precipitate act while he was gently raising the window and slipping over the sill. If St. Geoffry were in the blackmailing scheme he would naturally be its leader, since he would easily dominate Coskar. It was reasonable to suppose, moreover, that he was not the man to leave the letter in other hands than his own, and that he would carry it on his own person wherever he went. If he did carry it, where else could it be if not in the pocket so carefully secured?

Carter was across to the chair in three steps. From the room beyond came the murmur of voices. He seized the waistcoat and unfastened the pin with

nervous fingers. Inside was a thin black pocketbook. He transferred it to his own coat, hurried back to the window and flung himself out upon the fire-escape. In his haste he stumbled and his foot kicked smartly against the woodwork. He did not wait to close the window behind him.

As he grasped the iron ladder he heard a shout from the apartment. Instantly he let himself go, with hands at the side of the ladder, dropping with torn palms to the second floor landing. He caught the next ladder just as a revolver barked above, and he heard the sharp spat of a bullet on the iron railing beside him. He went down the second ladder with small regard for hands or clothing. Swinging on to the last, thankful even in that tense moment for his foresight in placing it, he glanced upward a second while he slid to the ground. Two figures filled the open window, and as he looked alternate splashes of red flame shot at him. At the moment he threw himself against the cellar door he felt a sharp twinge of pain in his shoulder.

Through the dark toward the front he staggered, falling twice. Out on the basement steps he stayed a moment to see that the street was still safe, then dashed westward. Faint shoutings sounded from the rear. A light flashed on the first floor. At the far side of Lexington Avenue he turned to catch a glimpse of a lumbering figure running from Third Avenue. He hurried on, turned north and slowed to a walk when beyond all danger of pursuit.

His own rooms were not far away, and he let him-

self in with fingers so scored and lacerated that they could scarcely hold the key. He found that the bullet had glanced lightly along his shoulder blade, inflicting nothing but a scratch. Then he took out the black pocketbook. It contained several folded papers and envelopes. One of these, well worn from much handling, was addressed in a graceful hand to Jerry Coskar. The enclosure was signed "Marion Keith."

The next afternoon he was once more on the road to the little Keith cottage, riding one of Champney's bays this time, and once more he was telling himself that it was not that the girl could not stir him, but that he would not let himself be stirred. The calm light of reason, that very valuable asset, assured him that he had acted precipitately and without due consideration of the consequences, but promised him that he might be forgiven if he stopped right where he was with the affair. He yielded the point to reason, and meanwhile spurred his horse.

She saw him long before he reached the gate of the short drive, and was there to meet him, cool and satisfying in a simple white dress. The something that would not be the slave to reason within him thrilled to warmth at the sight of her. He swept off his cap, smiling, and without a word of explanation held the letter out to her. She caught it with a startled cry, staring from the paper to his face in wonder.

"Mr. Carteret, how did you do it?" she breathed.

"Perhaps we needn't go into that," he answered lightly. "By the way," he went on, coming for want of better material to a question that had puzzled him

all the way out on the train, "why was it that—they—should have taken just this time to put their plan into execution? And there's another queer thing, Miss Keith. Why should they have thought that you would, or could, pay them? I confess I don't quite see it."

She drew back from him a little with trouble in her eyes. "Then you have not heard? I thought you knew."

"Heard? What?"

"That I am to be engaged."

"Good Lord! To whom?"

"To Mr. Osterman."

He glared a moment, then brought a clenched fist down on the pommel of his saddle. This, then, was what he had run his risk for, to clear away the obstacle that had threatened her marriage. He saw it all clearly. Osterman was one of the wealthiest men in New York, twice a widower, thrice the girl's age. It was her mother who had engineered the affair, of course. Mrs. Keith would have no difficulty in recognizing the desirability of upholstering an ancient and threadbare name with a generous son-in-law. She had chosen Osterman, probably, because she could drive a hard bargain with him and because he was old.

The girl had tricked him, played with him! The letter would have been fatal, and he, weakened by that warmth in his heart, had been the dupe. At the thought he thrust out a hand. His fingers closed over the letter. She gave it to him mechanically, con-

fused by the look on his face. Ready and insistent, there leaped into his brain the possibilities that lay in this little note. He could use it, first of all, to smash the arrangement with Osterman. It gave him, moreover, a hold on Marion Keith, if he used it cleverly.

But he had forgotten the strange sympathy that lay between himself and this woman, while wild thoughts were forming behind his frown—thoughts that went hand in hand with the upspringing flames in his breast. She bridged the gap at a step.

"I am glad you have it," she said, with direct glance. "Now you know why I was not sure yesterday that I wanted to send them any answer at all."

"You mean——"

"Before it was they who were going to prevent it, and now it is you who will."

Dismay swept upon him like a sheet of icy spray. While she spoke he saw again what had warned him before, an awakening, a flash in her eyes, the signal. Ambition flooded back and the cold light of reason. Marion Keith had no money nor the prospect of any. He was still far from that unquestioned social eminence toward which his slow, careful efforts had steadily pushed him. Union with the honored name of Keith would not aid him. He would be nothing but a beggarly adventurer in the eyes of the world he lived for. All his calm power of judgment, all his intuitive power of analysis, awoke, alert, keen to aid him out of the position his folly had led him into.

He was armored against her sympathetic understanding now, as he felt for the right word.

“Your mother——” he said slowly.

And he had found the right word. No other could have borne down her challenging gaze, no other could have driven the color from her face, that had lifted proudly to his. She looked away, faltered—and he was safe. It was with a little sigh of relief, not unmixed with unacknowledged regret, perhaps, that he struck a match against his saddle and held it against the letter. They watched it burn, and when there was nothing left but a corner he let it flutter to the ground, and they watched that, too, until it had crinkled to ashes.

“I hope you will not become a stranger to us as Mrs. Osterman,” he said at parting.

“I shall never be a stranger to you, Mr. Carteret,” she said softly, giving him her hand.

And as he wheeled away Robert Carter knew that it had been given him to negotiate an escape more essential to the success at which he aimed than a score of mighty victories on the social battlefield.

CHAPTER X

A COURT CARD

THE picture flashed before him like a brief glimpse of landscape caught in a flicker of lightning. The night was raw and wet in the dripping clutch of the fog. Reflection of the blurred street lights showed in faint, dull streaks along the greasy pavements. Those who were still abroad hurried by, intent upon shelter. Robert Carter was covering the last block east toward Broadway at a sharp pace.

As he passed the door of a large, exclusive hotel he was aware that two men had stepped out of an automobile that had just drawn up at the curb. They turned and assisted a third man down the step. All were muffled in long coats and wore silk hats. Carter glanced at the group and in the vague glow from the hotel portal he received a vague impression of the third man's face. Then he had passed, the automobile door slammed, and the incident was over. He had forgotten it by the time he reached his car, but in the meanwhile he had lingered on the face. The casual thought came to him that the third man somewhat resembled the Prince Augustus.

Prince Augustus of Darmstadt had dawned upon

the social world a week before as the bright particular event of a backward season. His visit was without diplomatic significance. He had come, it was said, as the result of long friendship with the Covingtons, the present head of the family having chummed with him during student days at Leipsic.

There had been a sad dearth of titles upon the gilded carpets that fall, a condition that bid fair to place the Prince in the position of the football for a social Rugby match. But the Covingtons, whose guest he was, had plans of their own and kept him close within their own circle. Carter had seen him for a moment at the yacht club and had studied him as he did all figures of importance coming within his ken. He had filed the Prince away as a handsome, bearded man of medium height, with strong face and democratic manner. For the rest he had maneuvered an entire evening, without success, to obtain an introduction. There was a group hedging the personage about to which the Virginian had never been able to penetrate.

Meanwhile, he had nourished hopes. It would be worth while to have some slight acquaintance with Prince Augustus, to be able to greet him at meeting or exchange a word with him now and then. He was convinced that the distinguished visitor would prove approachable and kindly. He had considered the possibility of utilizing Stanhope, who was close with the Covingtons, but a bald demand for presentation would not serve. The next large gathering at which the Prince would be present was the Mannard

dance, set for the following Friday evening. He had been forced to give over his idea of making advances at that affair, however, owing to the unfortunate fact that he had not been invited to be present.

He drifted from the *Café Martin* into the *Masquanan Club* in the evening four days later with Birdsall Mannard, who had made one of the party during the cruise on Stanhope's yacht. He was on good terms with Birdsall through his easy familiarity with things to eat, a matter that had cost him no little cramming and study. Birdsall nursed a single passion for the table, and the Virginian had been quick to understand and master the necessary line of attack according to his invariable method. He had counted a trifle too confidently upon his intimacy with the tubby young man as an aid in obtaining an invitation to the Mannard dance. But he had seen, on considering his disappointment, that the gastronomic enthusiast would have little to say in preparing the list of guests. His department was the menu.

It required slight cerebration to discover that something lay uneasily upon his usually placid companion. Either Birdsall was under stress of mental weather or the qualms of indigestion brought that abstracted frown to his unaccustomed brow. Carter was a little curious. He had an idea that it might prove amusing if not instructive to learn the cause. It was not a difficult task. Birdsall was no match for the keen wit and deft touch of Robert Carter.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned at last. "Why shouldn't you know if you want to, Carteret? I can't see any

objection, as long as you keep it away from the confounded newspapers. The long and short of it is that the Prince has disappeared."

"What?"

"Gone. Vanished. Blown away. Wiped off the map."

"Prince Augustus of Darmstardt?"

"Yes, hang it all, who else? Did you ever hear of such luck? Here it is Wednesday, and we're giving that affair on Friday. And won't we be in a fine fix without him! And just think of the supper I've ordered! We're done, Carteret, everlastinglly done. Folks come in. 'Where's the Prince?' Echo answers, 'Where?' Big excitement, scandal, sensation. Nobody stay for supper. And such a supper, Carteret! I ordered it myself." Birdsall smothered another groan somewhere within his large person. Carter was intensely interested.

"But, man alive, this is impossible," he broke out. "The Prince has a whole suite with him, bodyguards, secret service men, personal attendants. Some one must know where he is. Probably he's just dropped out of sight for a few days. It's a way these people have."

"You don't understand, Carteret," returned Birdsall impatiently. "There's the devil of a row over this thing. It's a government matter already. His suite are all here, where he left them, clawing the air and shrieking by cable for the whole German army. The ambassador at Washington has stuck in an oar with all kinds of wicked intimations. The police

haven't been told yet because they're making the most desperate efforts to keep it quiet, but there are a hundred government detectives on the job. Not that I care about the stuffy old Prince. Let him get us decently through with our dance and the supper and he can go to the bottomless pit for all of me. Oh, maybe my mother isn't in a state of mind!"

"When did it occur, this disappearance?"

"It was last Saturday night. He went to a musicale at the Edgemeres'. You know how proud they are of their beastly little interior court, where you have to drive in one gate and out the other within ten square feet. Three rigs make bedlam of it, and there were sixty on Saturday night. Well, there was some delay in getting the Prince's automobile up to the door when the guests were leaving, and about a dozen people were shouting for it. He was anxious to get away, and when his pet secretary, Hackenback, hurried up and gestured to the street, indicating that he had found the machine outside, the Prince followed him.

"A few minutes later some one saw Hackenback running around the rooms, looking under the rugs and behind the curtains for his Prince. It seems that the man who had led the Prince away wasn't Hackenback at all, but a man disguised to resemble him."

"Kidnaping?"

"So to speak."

"And they've really kept it quiet?"

"Sure. Most every one was gone from the Edgemeres' before the thing was straightened out. The

Covingtons know it, and they told mother on account of her dance, which was rather decent. Not that it makes much difference. It's too late to call the thing off."

Here was a bit of inside information! Carter took a little mental excursion around the angles of the situation and found source for satisfaction. For while Birdsall continued to wheeze his woe about the supper the Virginian was busy with the picture that had been photographed on his brain during his walk on Saturday night: At the time he had seen in the face only a resemblance. It had not even occurred to him that it might be the Prince himself. But now he saw the possibility. He had passed the hotel at about the hour when the guests were leaving the Edgemeres, a few blocks away. If the Prince had indeed been kidnaped those in the plot would not have attempted to take him far.

Parting from Birdsall with some few well chosen expressions of sympathy as to the threatened catastrophe, he made his way to the hotel. It was a large place, modern and expensive, catering chiefly to resident families, though favored by wealthy Southern visitors. Its lobby was not enough of a public lounge to serve him, as a stranger, for a post of observation. He walked to his own rooms, packed a suit case and returned to the hotel in a hansom. While signing the book at the desk he glanced back over the names for the last two weeks, but they told him nothing. Judging that the top floor would give him the best strategic

position he took a small room under the sun parlors at the rear.

A carpeted nook in the lobby screened by palms held two writing-tables, and he established himself at one of them. From where he sat he could command the elevators and observe all who used them. His plan was to watch and codify those who went in and out as a basis for inquiries. It was a tiresome business. All afternoon he held his post, apparently busied with a voluminous correspondence. After a time he moved into the café, but remained near the door leading into the lobby. The electric globes hidden about the cornices of the rotunda had just relieved the gloom of fading day when he saw a man come through the revolving door and walk toward the desk. Struck by a suggestion of familiarity in the figure, Carter returned to his palm screen. The man who had just entered was standing near the elevators, waiting to ascend. He wore a long black mackintosh with a cape.

As he turned the Virginian had a glimpse of his face and recognized it. He knew that dark skin, that stubby mustache and out-thrust jaw. It was his mysterious antagonist in the affair of the rosewood cabinet, the stranger who had engineered the plan to blackmail Bidwell and who had so nearly inflicted mortal injury upon Carter's social aspirations. Carter had never seen him since, nor had he been able to identify him. But he felt instinctively that where this man moved something evil had its being. If the Prince were here, in this hotel, it was a fair chance

that the gentleman with the stubby mustache knew why and how.

He had thought to question the hotel servants if he discovered something to verify his suspicions, but he amended that resolve. He could not know when he might be approaching a confederate, and he could not afford to risk giving the alarm. The next afternoon found him again on watch, a raincoat and a wide-brimmed felt hat near at hand. The stranger might not return; might have no connection with the disappearance. But the course he now planned to pursue offered him the best and safest way to test the theory he had formed. "Mackintosh" did not appear at the same hour, but still Carter sat at his desk. The string of residents returning from business diminished, and the little orchestra began its first number. Groups began to move into the dining-room.

Carter held his place until close upon nine o'clock. He was almost ready to abandon his plan permanently when the revolving door creaked and "Mackintosh" strode by. A second later the Virginian, his hat drawn low and his raincoat unbuttoned so that the flapping collar helped conceal his face, followed him to the elevator. The situation was favorable. There were no women among those waiting, and three stout gentlemen in dinner jackets crowded into the cage ahead of him. He entered last, keeping one of the stout gentlemen between himself and "Mackintosh." Then he moved over until he was just back of the stranger and almost in contact with him. The cape of the other's garment was within easy reach, and just as

the cage started upward he reached out a hand that held a little contrivance he had prepared. What he fastened to the edge of the cape was nothing more conspicuous than a very small black pin. He ran it loosely into the fabric and stood ready.

As the elevator stopped at the ninth floor "Mackintosh" stepped out quickly, with Carter almost upon his heels. When they were both out of the cage the Virginian dropped the rest of his contrivance to the floor. The stranger heard some one behind and stopped where three corridors met, glancing over his shoulder. But the Virginian had no wish to follow him, and had noted the general direction in which the other had started. Without pausing he swung into an opposite corridor. He rounded a turn, then stopped and looked back around the corner. "Mackintosh" had disappeared.

Hurrying back, Carter began a swift and silent search of the other two corridors, with eyes upon the carpet. Before the last room at the rear of the building he stooped and picked up a tiny white button. It was fastened to the most delicate of black silk threads, and the thread ran under the door before him. At the other end of that thread was the pin he had fastened to the stranger's cape. He listened a moment, but could hear nothing from within. Then he pulled gently. There was no resistance, and he knew that the pin had been dislodged, probably when "Mackintosh" removed his garment. He drew the pin out through the crack in the door and made a quick inspection of the hall before retreating.

The room to which he had tracked "Mackintosh" was directly under his own, two floors above. The transom was dark. So was that of the adjoining room. The transom of the third room, however, was aglow.

Carter dressed and went to Martin's for a late dinner. There he found Birdsall Mannard, torn between his secret sorrow and his appreciation of a peach Melba. It appeared that there had been few developments and that the detectives were still at fault, with small prospect of relief for the anxious Mannards.

"It'll all have to come out at the dance, I suppose," mourned Birdsall, "and everybody'll be so busy talking they won't think of the supper. We might use the excuse the Covingtons have been passing that he is visiting in the Adirondacks. But how can we, when every one knows this affair was just for him?"

"Have you found out the motive of the kidnapping?" asked Carter.

"Ransom, I suppose," sighed Birdsall. "There was some kind of a shadowy proposition received to-day, I understand, though I don't know what it was. The old man would be willing to stand his share if they'd let us have him for Friday night."

"I have an idea," began Carter.

"Keep it. There's a hard winter coming," said Birdsall, with a heavy attempt at jocularity.

"I have a vague idea that I know where he is."

"Heavens!" the other exploded; then his stare gave way to a slow smile. "You surely did startle me."

"The only trouble is that if I get him just in time

for your affair to-morrow night I'll have to come without any invitation."

Birdsall turned red with embarrassment and indignation. Carter had never shown such execrable taste before, he thought. Carter noted and laughed as the other rose.

"It's all right, Birdsall. Don't get huffy. But if I do arrive with the Prince in tow, remember to help me out of the situation. Rally to my support, will you? If I save your supper for you you can't do less."

Birdsall moved his chubby bulk off without answering.

"And that," said Carter to himself, "was an error. I've got to find the Prince now."

He waited until well past midnight. It was clear and cold, with a young moon to aid him. He had pulled his heavy brass bed close to a window and had fastened one end of a knotted rope about it. In his pocket were his revolver and a long screwdriver. Cautiously he let himself over the sill. It was a slow and dangerous descent. He had no skill in such tactics, and he spun and scraped the wall uncomfortably. He rested a moment on the window ledge of the floor below, then still more slowly resumed his journey.

As he came abreast the upper pane at the ninth floor he could see that the shade was drawn. No light showed at the sides. He braced himself on the sill, taking a turn of the rope about his left arm to steady himself, and stooped with his screwdriver. Fitting it under the window he pried gently. He had come pre-

pared to find the catch on, but the window came up readily. He raised it without noise.

Balancing on one foot and holding the shade away he lowered himself into the room. Once safely on the floor he dodged under the shade with a quick movement and stood upright and alert. There was no sound in the room. A faint glow from the hall came through the transom, and he could see that he was alone. Garments on a sofa showed that the place was tenanted. At his left was a door into the adjoining room. He turned the knob gently. The door yielded. He opened it carefully for an inch and peered within.

Carter was prepared for some confirmation of his suspicions—they had been well based—but he could not suppress an exclamation at what he now saw. The room was lighted by a shaded drop globe from the chandelier. Beyond the stream of light was a bed, and upon this, with wrists together above his head and wide, staring eyes toward the door that concealed the Virginian, lay Prince Augustus of Darmstadt.

Carter assured himself that there was no one else in the room and pushed open the door. Exactly opposite, on the other side of the room, was another door, standing ajar, opening into darkness. Looking down upon the helpless Prince, who followed his actions without a word, Carter saw that his hands and feet were tightly bound. He was pale and haggard, his collar had been torn off, his shirt bosom was wrinkled and stained, and his dress clothes were disarrayed.

Apparently he had been left upon the bed since the night of his capture, and had had none too tender treatment from his captors.

A glance from the eyes of the Prince told Carter that there was danger beyond the darkened door. He bent over the bed and slashed the ropes at wrists and ankles, then, revolver in hand, waited. Augustus carefully stretched his limbs before essaying to leave the bed. Then, weakly, but with caution, he raised himself and slipped to the floor, where he stood, swaying uncertainly. Carter took his arm and together they moved upon their escape.

They reached the open window in safety. Carter whispered a word in the Prince's ear, handed him his revolver and began to climb. It was a difficult feat for one not hardened to such lofty voyaging. He made his way up by straight arm pull and sheer strength, sending a strange, thankful thought into the past, whence he had his broad shoulders and sinew. At the top he waited a moment. There was no sound from below. He twitched the rope. There was an answering twitch, and he began to pull. The Prince proved remarkably heavy, and he found it necessary to secure the advantage of each heave by a hitch around the bed-post. The other was within three feet of the top when he stopped a moment and looked down. And then in the phantasmal radiance of the young moon he caught a glimpse of a white cheek where black beard should have been.

With one bound Carter was across the room and out into the hall, locking the door after him. The

stairs were near at hand, and he almost fell down the two flights. Some instinct led him to try the third door of the suite first, and it gave before him. Unmindful of possible enemies, he stumbled through it, through the Prince's bedroom and into the room where he had made his entrance. On the floor lay the motionless body of the Prince.

Carter shook him savagely and raised him. He opened his eyes and groaned. The Virginian lifted him to his feet. He did not even glance up to see whether the man on the rope had discovered his flight. Partly carrying his burden, he managed to reach the hall. The motion revived Augustus a little, and he pressed his hand to his head. Carter understood. The unknown man, "Mackintosh," probably had been on guard and awake, had followed the Prince to the window and had stunned him with a blow. Taking the Prince's place on the rope, he had proceeded to vengeance upon the rescuer above.

There was no time to lose. He made his way to the stairs, still dragging the Prince, and started down. Augustus grew stronger as they went on, and the Virginian read with approval the square, firm lines that showed through the suffering on his face. At the top of the last broad flight Carter gave his orders, and the other understood. They took a long breath, leaped down the remaining stairs and fled across the lobby into the street. Before the astonished night clerk could start up from his nap they had streaked by him and had passed beyond the reach of his feeble yell.

Carter and the Prince Augustus of Darmstadt came to a clear understanding within the next hour in the Virginian's bachelor apartment. The Prince had fallen an easy victim to the plot. Once in the automobile he had been warned by the pressure of a revolver against his side that resistance was useless, and the revolver had continued its admonition while he was being taken into the hotel and up to the room where he was confined. "Mackintosh" had impressed upon him that his life depended upon his silence. His captors had said little to him, but he understood that their object was the payment of a large ransom for his release, either by the American government to avoid unpleasant results, or by his own family.

"And now, Mr. Carteret," said the Prince in excellent English, as they came to the end of mutual explanations, "what can I do to show, in some part, my deep appreciation? By no very great stretch of the imagination you have saved my life. In any case you have prevented much evil to me and mine; it may be, to yours also. What can I do?"

Carter smiled calmly. "Of course, your highness, it is idle to deny that I would be most happy to see more of you during your visit. As you must know, social conditions in this country are not so stable as in your own. Here one may move in the scale. Frankly, your highness, you can be of help to me. As a man of the world you can understand me when I say that while enjoying your company I shall gain the only reward that is of value to me. Such is the only return you can make me for my slight services."

The Prince Augustus of Darmstadt wore a hat that was larger than six and a half in size. He returned the smile of the younger man. "So be it," he said. "I do understand. Meanwhile, I am at your service. What would you have me do?"

"I have," said Carter reflectively, "an extra dress suit that would fit you perfectly, or can have it by night. I observe that your orders and decorations have not been disturbed. You have, then, full social armor here. To-night is the Mannard dance, at which you are expected. I also am to attend. We will let our friend 'Mackintosh' go for the present. We will stay here for the day, and to-night we will appear at the dance together. What do you say?"

The Prince shook his hand. "It shall be as you say. The news of my escape shall be withheld until to-night, and to-night we make our re-entrance together. In the meanwhile something to eat and a little sleep would not come amiss if you can arrange it, for I shall hope to do you credit in my appearance."

"You shall both do and make me credit," said Carter, laughing again.

CHAPTER XI

AN EDUCATIONAL INCIDENT

THERE is a moral, a social and an economic force in the ordinary city directory that Robert Carter, social climber, could not overlook. It was brought to his attention one day while he was referring to that ponderous piece of literature in a corner drug store. Thereupon he was moved to reflection.

He observed that though few and favored are they who may read their names in the social register, many and not all unfavored are they who may derive a similar delight from the directory. It was desirable, highly so, that R. Pendleton Carteret should some day appear in the little guide to the elect. That being out of the question for the time being, what about the larger and more common publication?

He ran over the leaves. "Hemkin, Raoul W., pres., —— Wall, h. —— Madison Av." Now, if a man must submit to be herded with the crowd it is just as well that he should hedge himself about with a degree of exclusiveness. There was a world of possibility in that "pres." "Hemkin, Raoul W.," might be president of anything, from a republic to a chess club, but

the single word "pres." served to hold him aloft in a manner suggestive of dignity and reserve. He was aware that he distinctly wished his own name might carry some such attachment.

And this is the manner, trivial as it may appear, in which Robert Carter started upon one of the most instructive experiences of his career. It was a small thing, perhaps, but he had made his remarkable advance into the fair, guarded fastnesses of society without a passport chiefly by his attention to the small things. The suggestion dwelt somewhere in the corner of his mind to bear fruit at convenient opportunity.

The opportunity came one afternoon during a coaching trip at Lenox. Carter was the guest of the Mannards, not on the unsupported solicitation of Birdsall Mannard, be it said, for the Virginian knew exactly what value to place upon that fat-witted knight of the table. The word had come from none other than Mrs. Mannard herself, and had marked a distinct and very real triumph for the aspiring Carter. He was sitting with young Janson Cutten on the back seat, and they had entered into casual discussion that ranged from golf to finance. The latter subject was to the fore.

"Heard something about your father's intended re-organization of the —th Avenue road," ventured Carter. In simple truth Carter had no more knowledge of the doings of the —th Avenue road or old Henry Cutten than any other reader of the daily papers. But he was an adept at assuming offhand

familiarity with any theme helpful in making conversation.

"Oh, yes," assented Janson languidly, "there is something of that kind in view."

"Welcome news to the stockholders, myself among them," continued Carter.

"So it would seem," nodded the other. "From all accounts the company was in a fearful state. The governor thought something might be done with it. It was lopped off from the Panurban system, you know, by court order, and was flopping around in a helpless sort of way."

"What's he going to do?"

"He hasn't confided in me," answered Janson dryly.

Then he went on, with a grimace: "He's just begun my practical training, and I've not progressed far enough to be on the inside."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," said Carter hastily. "I was interested in merely a general way."

"It's all right, old chap. I knew you weren't aiming to pump me," smiled Janson. "It's fairly well known, I'll go bail, how the governor and I stand on business. But since you're interested at all, cast your eyes upon me more carefully. I'm slated for the new vice-president of the company."

He said this with such droll good humor and such frank appreciation of its significance that Carter broke into open laughter. Janson Cutten had been one of the wildest fledglings of the season two years before, and his appearance in any organization more serious than a dinner society at that time would have served

as a rare joke. It had been rumored that Cutten, senior, had taken in hand the regeneration of his son and heir recently.

"Still, why not?" said Carter a moment later. "You'll have to serve your apprenticeship somewhere."

"I suppose," returned the other doubtfully. "But I shall hardly find the duties arduous. The vice-presidency of the —th Avenue Railroad under Henry Cutten is not exactly the place one would pick out from which to reach a hand into the seething caldron of finance. I happen to know that he offered it to at least two others before he thought of me. He's scratching for directors now."

Then Carter suddenly remembered the drug store compendium of popular information and the thought it had raised. Director! Why not? It would look extremely well, almost as well as "pres."

"Your honored father hasn't cast his hook into these troubled waters for his directors yet," he suggested. "I wonder if he knows that one of the secret, burning ambitions of my young life is to serve on the directorate of a street railroad. I've held a block of the original stock for a year now, and it's brought me nothing so far."

It was the other's turn to laugh. "Now, there's a really brilliant idea. R. Pendleton Carteret, the mirror of fashion and the favorite of the salons, ventures upon the thorny path of industrial empire building. Your fate is sealed, old chap. I'll recommend you to the governor to-night."

"There's no telling where the —th Avenue Railroad will end if it draws a few more heavyweights like ourselves into its service," said Carter affably.

Through some chance or mischance Carter had annexed a number of the —th Avenue shares, the identity of which had never been lost in the various combinations of the city's traction system. His cautious market operations had gone well with him, his balance was good, and he had no occasion to dispose of the holdings. He was thus given some shadow of claim to the position, and it came about that at a nominal meeting of stockholders a few weeks later, when Henry Cutten put through his list of officers, the name of R. Pendleton Carteret was on the list as a director.

Beyond the slight tickling of his vanity and the satisfaction he took from looking himself up in the city directory, the Virginian drew no immediate result from the transaction. He had almost forgotten the hollow honor when Mrs. Wilfred Stilton recalled it to his mind rather unexpectedly.

The charming Mrs. Stilton was a widow, and, consequently, empress of her own affairs, a fact which may have accounted in part for her marked interest in matters of business. She never made the mistake of introducing sordid topics in company that would have taken offense, but there were certain men in the active banking and operating sets who found her wholly fascinating in her coquettish assumption of familiarity with the movements of securities and conditions on 'Change. With these friends she discussed,

behind a fan, the latest rumor of dividend or consolidation, while more conventional, though perhaps less profitable, talk was under way elsewhere. Meanwhile, she had astonishing success with her investments.

"And that rattletrap old street road of yours, Mr. Carteret," was her unctuous challenge to the Virginian. "I'm sure you're planning some surprising coup, now, aren't you?" Carter parried the sparkling glance. He had a constitutional objection to feminine activity in masculine pursuits. But he recovered himself the next moment. Mrs. Stilton was wealthy and well received. It was never his policy to allow sentiment to interfere where advantage might lie.

"You are flattering, but poorly informed," he laughed. "I am on the directorate merely to lend respectability and dignity to that body. The chances are, Mrs. Stilton, that you know much more about the —th Avenue than I do."

But the incident aroused a latent curiosity in him. He had attended one stupid meeting of the directors, at which a fixed number of phrases supplied by Cutten had been mumbled and voted through without comment. Now he was reminded that, after all, he was an officer of the company, and as such entitled to know something of its conduct. He had made a fair start toward education in the intricacies of wealth building. He was at least entered in the primary grade. And he was inclined now to resume his studies.

In pursuance of the plan he visited the company's office the next day. That is to say, he visited that part

of the Baltic Building occupied by Cutten's firm. The "office" of the ——th Avenue, strictly speaking, was under Henry Cutten's hat. By deputation it was in possession of the particular clerk charged with the superintendence of the company's books, for the great financier kept the actual management and routine at a distance. Carter sought out this clerk, and in his capacity as director demanded all the recent reports and statements.

Accommodated with a sheaf of folders and some typewritten sheets, he settled himself in a corner of the room reserved for meetings of Cutten's various directorates and proceeded to his first text-book lesson in modern finance. He had never read a statement before. Perhaps he was the clearer sighted for this very reason. He dug through the figures with the single purpose of mastering the inner meaning of cryptic phrases and confusing items. For a long time the whole thing was a senseless jumble. Then, with his natural capacity for analysis and his ability to absorb and pluck the meat from a subject, he began to make some headway. Presently, under expenses, he came to this line:

Relying track between ——th and ——th Streets.. \$321,620

Slowly this little announcement took meaning in his mind. The distance between the streets named could not, at the most, be more than half a mile. And it had cost considerably more than a quarter of a million to take up the rails and replace them with

new ones within that space. Really, it was no simple problem, this conducting of a street railroad. To him, one of the uninitiated, for instance, this item appeared beyond comprehension. Yet here it was in cold print. It was clear that if he was to understand the matter at all he must begin with fundamentals. He decided that the subject was altogether too abstruse to be mastered in one afternoon, and he took the papers home with him.

Next day found him in the Astor Library, occupied with repelling books of statistics and State reports. By evening he felt that he had made progress. He had come upon a statement from another street railroad, dated a few years previously. This other road had also found occasion to relay its tracks over a distance of half a mile, and the total expense, so far as he could find, had been in the neighborhood of \$22,000. Yes, beyond doubt, he was making progress.

He made many other discoveries before he came to the end of his investigations, and the question took dim shape before him, shadowy, forbiddingly strange, but undeniably real. He continued his explorations. He questioned the clerk who presided over the books. He fell on the trail of a mysterious construction company that had, supposedly, done the track work on the —th Avenue road. He ran back into the ancient history of the road. He dug, wrought and squirmed among facts. Within a week he had all the necessary parts in place and was confronted with the astonishing result.

Thereupon Robert Carter, practical idler, clever

parasite and ambitious scaler of the social heights, dreamed a dream. Some years had passed since the Virginia country boy had won his first foothold toward the glittering goal. His successes had been many and easy. In every essential he had proved his qualification for the prize he desired. He had made himself one with these of the purple and fine linen; he had learned to live their lives, to think their thoughts. Throughout it all his supreme confidence in himself had prospered and waxed fat.

And now he went a degree further and persuaded himself that he could combat these molders of fortunes at their own game. Why should he not? He had consistently used them, overreached them, maneuvered them in furtherance of his schemes for social advancement. Should he not prove equally their master at handling the forces and fortunes they juggled? His weapons lay ready to his hand, and the taste for power was sharp on his tongue.

Decision once taken, he wasted no time in scruples. His first move was to seek Mrs. Stilton. She received him coquettishly and was quite willing to follow him into financial waters when he headed that way. Once started, he explained rapidly that he "and others" would take advantage of a bear raid upon —th Avenue. Certain stories would be made public next day that would bring the stock to hopeless smash. It was unfortunate, of course, since he had been connected with the road. But the connection was merely ornamental, and since the raid could not be stopped he might as well profit by the harvest. He

had remembered her interest in —th Avenue and had thought she would like to have a word in time. She did like it extremely. She was a thousand times obliged to Mr. Carteret for the information. She would certainly act upon it. How clever and thoughtful he was! And they parted with the friendly feeling of fellow conspirators.

Matters developed quickly. Carter himself placed heavy selling orders on the stock early in the afternoon, his resignation from the directorate having been left in the hands of the superintending clerk as a precautionary measure. His motive in calling Mrs. Stilton into his scheme was to increase the downward pressure and give body to the assault he planned. There were no others to whom he dared trust the tip. During the rest of the day he was busy in his apartments with the preparation of the manuscript that would be his 13-inch gun in the action. Having finished it by four o'clock, he sent it out to be mimeographed and ordered fifty copies.

At eight o'clock his preliminaries were complete. He was definitely launched on his experiment. He was content. Each detail had been well planned. There would be a terrific explosion on the morrow and from the wreckage would emerge R. Pendleton Carteret in a new rôle, a commanding financial figure, playing only for the biggest stakes, a live factor among the giants of wealth. He recalled Janson Cutten's grandiloquent phrase, "the thorny path of industrial empire building." He was on that path, and he could see no reason to fear failure.

He had his hand on the telephone receiver at half-past eight. Just as he was about to lift it from the hook the buzzer announced a visitor. He went to the hall door and opened it. Outside stood Jimmy Hope.

"Well, here's good fortune," exclaimed Carter, welcoming him with outstretched hand and drawing him into the sitting-room. "Sit down, won't you? Wait until I get the glasses. Haven't seen you in months. What blew you here?"

"Come to pluck your battered form off the rocks," said Hope grimly, with more feeling than precision. He helped himself sparingly from the bottle and selected the easiest chair. "What an utter, confounded idiot you are, Carteret."

"Thanks," said the Virginian calmly. "But why this sudden appreciation of my virtues?"

Jimmy Hope was a very different person from the tremulous, dissipated wastrel that Carter had helped to a wife during his first adventure in the metropolis. The firm hand of the woman had kept him carefully to the narrow way, and her love had coaxed the good grain of him to the surface. He took hold of the situation now with assurance.

"Question for question, Carteret. What ever induced you to embark on this utterly wild scheme of yours? Do you want to be crushed offhand? Thanks be, little Stilton had sense enough to sound Mrs. Hope on your exact eligibility as a tipster, and we heard the whole mad thing. I'm here to turn you back."

Carter rose abruptly. "Pardon me, Jim, but what the devil do you mean?"



"PARDON ME, JIM, BUT WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU MEAN?"
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"Mean? What do you mean? Here you are, an awfully decent chap, I'll allow, but with no more knowledge of the big game you're apparently hunting than the child new born. And of all things you have to start a raid on Cutten's properties. And if that isn't bad enough, you try to drag a woman along to help. Now let's hear the whole thing from start to finish."

The Virginian was on the verge of a sharp retort. He had fallen into the habit of regarding Jimmy as a good-natured nonentity, infinitely inferior to himself in all things but money and rank. The tone of condescension in the other's voice went hard, but he remembered that Hope was his good friend and had come in friendship, and a certain uneasiness possessed him.

"Well, if you're really interested, Jim," with a smile that was a trifle forced, "I think I can show you that I'm not quite out of my senses. The road is in a perfectly rotten state and I've found it out. It's been crooked all the way through. I don't propose to let that chance get away from me. When the facts are made public the bottom will drop out, of course. I propose to profit by it while exposing it. There you have the situation, and it's sane enough."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Hope, leaning back in utter amazement. "You—you are going to expose it! You find it's rotten! You propose to profit!" He silently apostrophized the ceiling with one limp hand.

"Yes," said Carter, warming to his case. "I know. I've been through the documents. I've got the proofs.

I tell you that millions of dollars have dropped out of sight. Where are they? Personally I don't care a rap, but I can stir up a fine rumpus by asking."

"A rumpus! Yes. And one that will squash you like a fly on the pane."

Carter produced another smile.

"Now look here," said Hope, straightening himself with sudden energy. "I won't waste time telling you what a forsaken lunatic you are. But if you're still amenable to reason listen to me.

"I know your position in this town better than any one else but yourself, I guess. You've done well. You've made a place for yourself. You're favorably known. If I've got you listed right that's exactly what you've been striving and planning for all this time. But, my dear boy, your success has turned your head. This is impossible. You'll be torn limb from limb. Cutten won't stop with taking every cent you've got. He'll drive you out of society. He'll drive you out of New York. Oh, you don't know. You haven't an idea. He can pull strings on every one you've met. Every one. Yes, even me. You'll be ostracized, besides failing miserably in the very thing you count on doing. It's worse than madness. It's simply chaos." The visitor's vehemence brought him to a pause.

"But I have proof," Carter put in eagerly. "I can't fail. The stock will go under like lead."

"Wrong," Hope went on. "Dead wrong. You're the only thing that will go under. Why, man, Cutten and his ring can move any security any way they like

as you would that matchbox. Do you think men like that would let you bother them? Like enough they'd have you in Islip by night. But what's the use? I'm here now, and I'll keep you from going any further. By force if necessary."

"On the contrary," said Carter, with a sudden sinking, "you're too late. I sent the story to the newspapers by special messenger an hour ago."

"What?" shrieked Hope, bouncing in his seat. The Virginian nodded and lighted a cigarette. He handed the other one of the mimeographed copies on the table. Jimmy glanced it through.

"Then it's all over," he groaned. "Good-by, old man. I'm sorry. I did my best." He got up with an effort and held out his hand. "Let us hear from you some time. My wife will regret this."

Carter stared at him. Was the situation really so serious? Was it possible that he had made so desperate a misplay? He was conscious, now, that he knew very, very little of the part he had chosen.

"Sit down, Jim," he said, laughing uneasily. "Explain your meaning. It seems to me you're a little previous."

Hope returned to the chair and took up the conversation with the conscientious air of one who lays a simple proposition before a child. "Carteret, my boy, you're a thousand miles at sea. What possible business is it of yours how Cutten manipulates the —th Avenue? The things he has done are done every day. A man like you has no more chance to stand

in the way of them than he has to stop a sixty-mile train by getting in front of it.

"With all your cleverness you've overlooked primal facts. If you want to get on, you absolutely must not pry into affairs that don't concern you. It's ruin if you do. Certain things are never mentioned or discussed in society. You've committed the unpardonable crime of aligning yourself with an attack upon the institutions that create wealth. That's all I can say. I hope you understand."

And Carter did understand. He had been blind; worse than that, a traitor to his own purposes. Hope was right, of course. What call had he to interfere with the way this class made its money? His proper part was to hang upon the class, to humor it, to know it for what it was, but to keep that knowledge to himself, to use its weaknesses and its vanities, but not to seek stand-up fights with it. His advantage must come at second hand. He was not built or equipped to wrest it in the arena. His battlefield was social, not financial. He saw his mistake now, too late, he reflected bitterly.

"Well, you've done it now," said Hope gloomily. "I suppose it's too late to call back that messenger?"

"Yes. The story is in every office by this time."

"And with your name on it, of course."

"No. I was just going to start telephoning when you came in. I was going to explain to each city editor——"

"Hold on. Do you mean that no one knows yet where the story comes from?"

"No. But what difference does that make? They have the story."

Hope had yanked him out of his chair and was waltzing him grotesquely about the room. "Still crazy," he yelled. "You're saved and don't know it! Not a sheet will dare touch a line without some one to stand for it. They'll shun it as they would the plague. You poor, doddering imbecile, you don't see it yet! I tell you the story is useless without a responsible author. Get your messenger and buy him off, quick. This is too, too much!"

They went over the situation calmly an hour later. The messenger, having returned, had been discreetly silenced. It appeared that he had delivered all his envelopes without incident and had left before being questioned at each office. It was a close call, but Carter was safe.

"You have to close out all your deals and swallow the loss," said Hope after a time.

"It's cheap at the price," said the Virginian with full conviction.

"And I should advise you in future to leave the manipulation of large enterprises to others. Cutten will hear of your sales, and he'll be on the watch for you. But as it stands he has no pressing need to go gunning for you."

"Jim," said Carter solemnly, "I hereby register a valuable failure and cut loose from 'the thorny path of industrial empire building' for all time. Here, with my hand upon it, endeth my first and last lesson in high finance."

CHAPTER XII

A VOLUNTEER GARRISON

A FIGURE stole from the shadow of the hedge, advanced two rapid and stealthy steps and flung itself upon the lodge keeper without a sound. The man fell from his chair and grappled desperately with his assailant. Robert Carter, held motionless by the suddenness of the attack, stared at the grotesque, heaving mass in the moonlight. He was about to rush in with a cry when two more figures darted from the hedge and threw themselves upon the two.

The struggle was short. Silently, as men who act upon a careful plan, the three subdued the one, held his arms behind his back and bound them. When they had him safe the first released his hold of the lodge keeper's throat. There came a choking, gasping breath, stifled the next instant by a blow. A handkerchief was stuffed into the victim's throat and he lay quietly enough. The three stood looking down at him. Carter drew back swiftly behind the massive granite gate post.

The note of violence thrust thus sharply athwart the peaceful pastoral with its jangling discord left him confused and unnerved. He had learned at the town,

where he was spending a week in retreat, of the arrest in New York of Paley Benham, president of the Matrix National Bank. Moved partly by lack of occupation and desire for a stroll, partly by some vague thought that he might learn further details, he had walked the two miles to Benham's magnificent country home above the Hudson.

He had been one of a house party at Benham's place a year before. He had remembered that the long, white stone building at the crest of its sloping lawn was a thing of marvelous beauty on nights of clear moonlight like this. While almost certain that Benham's family was abroad and that there would be no one on the property but the caretaker, he had allowed his impulse to carry him the lonely road to the gates. He had noticed the lodge keeper sitting over an evening pipe at the door of the lodge. He had even started forward, with a pleasant greeting on his lips, when the rush of the dark figure checked him.

The voices of the three came to him, but even in the isolation of the vast estate they spoke in low tones and he could not distinguish words. He glanced up at the house with a first instinctive thought to raise the alarm, but the pale, ghostly white of the façade was blank. He sank to his heels, crouching in the blackest of the shadow.

He could see after some minutes that two of the assailants had lifted the lodge keeper, who lay on his face, and were carrying him toward the lodge. He could not make out their faces. They were dressed in

black, with wide, soft hats, pulled low. They disappeared with their burden into the little dwelling. Presently came a flutter and then a steady glow of yellow light from within. It showed him a small window on the side facing the road where he was hidden. The third and smallest of the men remained outside the lodge in the shadow, leaning against the door and looking in.

Robert Carter debated his own part in all this. It was strictly none of his affair. His policy was never to engage in adventures not clearly dictated by his interest. He had little taste for risks, as risks. Who were these three? Burglars or tramps? Scholl, the lodge keeper, would suffer nothing more than a night of confinement at their hands. No, he was certainly not concerned.

All this he argued when he had recovered from the shock of surprise. The fact that he was without a revolver completed the case, and the clear conclusion was that he had best betake himself quietly to the town and notify the constable. But a thought held him. It was a strange trick of fate that on the very day that brought Benham's arrest his home should be entered. Dwelling upon this for a moment, he forgot the part of discretion and moved cautiously toward the window. The third man's back was turned, and a few steps placed the corner of the lodge between them. The sill was well above his head when he stood upright, and he did not dare to raise himself.

"So all you've got to do, my friend, is to accept the matter in a philosophical spirit and wait patiently until

some wandering rustic comes to your aid," said a voice. Carter felt a thrill of quickening curiosity. This was no burglar, or else he represented the very pink of the profession. Scholl made no answer, probably for the ample reason provided by the handkerchief. Steps began shuffling and mounted the stairs with awkward halting. Apparently they were carrying the helpless Scholl up to his bedroom. The watcher outside entered, as if the removal of the lodge keeper was his signal. A few minutes later the steps descended. They had not reached the bottom when the one waiting below called out: "Did you find the keys?" The tone was thin and nervous, that of a very young man.

"Not a key," was the answer. There was a scraping of chairs as the three took their seats.

"But there must be one."

"Hold on, Ralph," said the voice that had enjoined Scholl to patience. "Don't get hysterical. He has some keys, all right, but you can hardly expect him to produce them, unless you care to apply the torture or something of the kind. He's a faithful old beast."

"Then how are we to get in?" persisted the other.

"Not much trouble about that, I guess."

"Do you think he saw me—recognized me?"

"No. For Heaven's sake, keep cool, Ralph. You give me the fidgets. Get a grip on yourself. We've got the whole night before us. There's no one within half a mile, at least, and the whole thing is like picking up nuts."

The one who had not yet spoken broke in. The

heavy timbre of his voice served as well as a personal history to inform the listener that his was a different type. "Y' know the combination all right, do y'? Ain't forgotten it, have y'?"

"No," said he addressed as Ralph. "I was afraid I might forget it, and I've written it down to make sure."

His questioner grunted ungraciously. Carter heard him move about the room to the accompaniment of the grunts and out into the little kitchen. Returning, he clattered something on the table.

"There's ham and bread and beer," he announced during the operation. "Not much for a guy what had the whole place to himself."

"But—but—you're not going to eat now?" stammered Ralph shrilly.

"That's what I'm doin', m' son," returned the other with full mouth. "Ain't no use goin' empty on a job."

Carter could almost see the gesture from his cooler companion that restrained the reply of the excitable Ralph. Silence followed. The Virginian, keen to know the purpose that brought this ill-assorted band of thugs to Benham's place, waited impatiently.

"What time was he arrested?" asked the cool one.

"At four o'clock," returned Ralph.

"Can't possibly get bail before noon to-morrow," was the comment.

"He might get a message to some one and send them up here."

"You forget that the one we came on, at six o'clock,

was the last until eight o'clock in the morning. No use, Ralph, you can't work up a scare any way you put it. It's too easy. Hand me the loaf."

The discussion was closed, apparently, and Carter did not linger. He stole back to the hedge and along in its shadow. If he knew no more, he at least knew that these men were no common burglars and that their movements were timed by Benham's misfortune. They meant to open a safe. What they would take therefrom was probably more precious to Benham than money or jewels.

It was characteristic of the Virginian that he formed his decision when he gleaned so much of the situation. He would take a hand in this game. Benham had been rather friendly with him, but it was not a matter of loyalty or gratitude. He knew Benham for one of the most brilliant, dashing and successful financiers of the decade, sure to "come back" in spite of all checks. Here was a chance, providentially offered, to confirm a lifelong claim upon a powerful figure in the world of wealth.

At the point on the hedge where the shrubbery circled out about the lawn he turned toward the house. Screened from the lodge by the scanty fall foliage, he broke into a run. The windows on the first floor of the Benham residence were protected by storm shutters. He passed around the side to the porte-cochère. The arch under which the drive ran was built, like the house itself, of rough granite blocks. A stout, well-grown ivy grew from the lawn side.

The vine gave him hand holds, and he found toe

grips on the projections of the stone. It was a sharp, painful scramble, but he won to the roof of the arch. He made his way from there to the roof of the veranda and began to try the windows. He found them too safely fastened for his one tool, a penknife. At the rear of the house he boldly smashed a pane with the handle. Throwing the lock he opened the window and stepped inside.

He remembered the arrangement of the house and felt his way along the corridor and down the stairs. In the wide entrance hall at the foot he had in mind a roomy bricked fireplace, fitted with huge brass and-irons and implements. His groping hand found the frame at the side and, hanging therefrom, the twenty-pound poker. Armed with this traditional household weapon, he was more confident.

An hour passed before his intent ear caught the first intimation of the approach of the invaders. The sound came from the library, at the side of the house opposite that entered through the porte-cochère. There was a small door to the veranda there, he recalled. He hurried to the library. In the corner was a steep flight of stairs leading to a gallery that ran about the room. Standing on the third and fourth steps he was placed well above and within striking distance of any one opening the door.

While he was taking his position, poker swung over shoulder, a steel tooth was biting and tearing at the door. Neither lock nor wood was strong. There was a splintering crash and it jarred open. The three men whose shoulders had been thrown against it were

jammed in the entrance. There was an instant of silence, broken by Carter's yell as he brought the poker down on the nearest head. Taken wholly by surprise the party huddled back with cries of terror, stumbling and falling over one another in their frantic efforts to escape this unseen and unsuspected foe. The Virginian saw fleeting figures on the lawn and stepped out to the veranda.

A form lay sprawled at his feet. Stooping close he could make out in the dim light the thin face of a young man, scarcely more than a boy. With some difficulty he dragged his unconscious victim into the house and propped him against the stairs. With fumbling fingers he bandaged the boy's head, using his handkerchief and stanching the flow from a cut in the scalp. Then he closed the door again and made shift to push the heavy library table against it. In the darkness he could hear the labored breathing of his captive.

Waiting there in momentary expectation of a renewed attack and running over the means by which he might repel it, he bethought him that he had not yet searched this new companion. He had his reward, for in the boy's hip pocket he found a revolver of small caliber, fully loaded, as he quickly assured himself. The possession of the arm lent him new courage. Fifteen minutes went by. The wounded youth stirred and groaned.

"Better?" asked Carter, his own voice echoing strangely in the black void of the house.

"Who—who is that?" came the faltering answer.

"Why, I'm the chap who gave you that clip on the head," returned Carter amiably. "And a good job for you that you wore a stiff derby." Apparently the other reflected painfully upon his cause for congratulation for some time.

"I suppose you're one of Benham's men," he said finally.

"Quite right."

"Then it's all up," was the comment.

"Right again, Ralph, my boy," said Carter. An exclamation and a scrambling movement from the stairs told him that the word had told. "Sit down and keep quiet," warned the Virginian. "The physician has particularly insisted that you are not to get excited and that any exertion will be followed by unfortunate complications. That's better.

"Now look here, Ralph," Carter went on more pleasantly, "you're a prisoner of war, understand? Just at present you're in my hands, to do with as I please. You identify me as one of Benham's men. I am, to the extent that I'm here to interfere with the game of you and your friends, whatever it is. They've gone away and left you. In the meantime, being in a position to dictate terms, I want to know what this precious raid was all about."

There was no answer from the stairs.

"I can understand, of course, that you don't care to tell me," said Carter after a pause. "If I guess aright it's not altogether to your credit. But it may be to your advantage. Let me make the situation clearer. I've got you, and I mean to keep you, if I

want to. Before many hours some of the trades-people from the town will find the lodge keeper, or Benham's messenger will arrive, or perhaps Benham himself may come. In any case, if you're still here you'll be behind bars by night for burglary. Ugly word, isn't it?"

A hard-drawn breath came from the stairs.

"I thought you'd find it so. Ralph, my boy, I'm not a prejudiced person. On the contrary, I'm quite reasonable. I happen along here just in time to head you and your friends off. From what? I don't know. But I want to find out. Now, let me hear the whole story. You can wager I'll listen a whole lot more sympathetically than a judge and a jury will."

"How do you know my name?" asked the weak voice.

"I was outside the lodge while the others were attending to the caretaker."

"Then Benham doesn't know?"

"Probably he only suspects, from the look of the thing. But I tell you frankly, Ralph, I'm in the dark, and your last chance to get out gracefully is to let me in."

"Well," returned the other slowly, "I can't quite place you, but if you really want to know I'd better let you, I suppose. I'll do the best I can, though my head is going like a beehive, and it's not a nice story.

"I'm Ralph Nitton. I guess you know me," he hastened on nervously; "most everybody does. After my father straightened that last scrape for me at Cambridge he found a place for me as Benham's secretary.

I lived here with Benham last summer. I tried to do the right thing, but Benham wasn't any too considerate. I suppose I deserved all I got, and he couldn't see that I was doing my best.

"Anyway, I left him a month ago. My father let me live at home. He never gave me a cent, and he was always at me for the mess I'd made of things. I was in with a spending crowd, and—well, a fellow took me aside one day and showed me how I could make a lot of money. I held out at first, but after a quarrel with my father I accepted. I was wild to have the means to do as I liked, to be quit of one and another that had always held a whip over me. I had the combination to Benham's safe, and the man knew it."

"Was that your soft-spoken friend who was so anxious to have you keep cool?"

"Yes. He's a sort of hanger-on and confidential functionary for some big people. The fight against Benham goes pretty far up, I guess, but I never heard who was back of it. They learned in some way that Benham was keeping a lot of his personal securities here. Benham didn't see any risk in that, but it was good enough for them.

"This morning it was found that a teller had cleared out with \$100,000 worth of negotiable bonds from the Matrix National. They had charges of irregularity ready and there was a run on the bank. Before Benham could get away to grab his securities they had him under arrest. Then we three, the agent and a bruiser and I, were sent down. If it had gone

as planned Benham's messenger would have taken a package out of the safe, all right. It wouldn't have held Benham's personal securities, but it would have held some of the stolen bonds, and the messenger would have been arrested just as he delivered the package to Benham, with evidence of participation in the teller's theft."

Carter whistled. "Truly a nice story," he said. Then he checked a further question and listened rigidly. Something had rasped on the steps to the veranda outside the library door. He caught up the revolver and the poker.

"Ralph," he whispered, "if you know what's healthy for you you'll sit tight where you are and say nothing."

The shock of a heavy body hurled against the door punctuated his warning. The barricading table gave a foot, and through the opening came the flash and stunning report of a revolver fired at random. Carter, sure that Ralph had been hit, for he lay on the stairs directly in line, jumped back behind the scanty protection of the oak newel post and fired three shots in rapid succession through the doorway. He was prepared for a rush, but it did not come. He stood ready, alert. There was no sound from the veranda. The drifting smoke left the opening clear, and he could make out nothing but the moonlit lawn beyond.

At that instant he was conscious of a cool draft of air. He wheeled quickly, but heard nothing. A vague sense of uneasiness oppressed him. He did not understand this suddenly abandoned assault. He re-

treated through the library, stepping with care. At the doorway into the entrance hall he dropped to hands and knees. He moved cautiously about the side wall, feeling and avoiding the furniture. Reaching the broad fireplace he crept into it.

Something was abroad in the house, something that crawled with infinite deliberation upon the polished floors. He could hear the brush of a body somewhere near him. The soft, stealthy advance was from the direction of the dining-room beyond, but he could not place it more exactly. At times it seemed to be close to him. He began to dislike his adventure exceedingly. Open fight in hot blood he knew and could welcome, but to crouch and await the approach of an unknown, ungaged danger, one that seemed to threaten each instant from the darkness—that was a thing to sap a man's will. He grew weak and fearful. After a time the sound ceased. He strained his ears to catch it again.

Then his hand resting on the bar of an andiron twisted sharply in his grasp under misplaced weight, the brass clattering against the hearth. The next second a huge flying mass fell upon him and he spun out into the hall, clawing and struggling with an assailant whose strength he knew at the first clasp was far greater than his own.

He fought hard, was overborne and pitched headlong underneath. A monstrous thumb closed about his throat and a flashing shock ached through him. With the dim eyes of fading consciousness he saw the room leap into light for a second. A gigantic figure

was clutching him. Above loomed the figure of Ralph Nitton, holding a flaring match in one hand and the heavy poker uplifted in the other. Then he passed into oblivion.

When he came back to consciousness it was bright daylight and his body was a thing of pain in every joint. He was lying on a divan, with bandaged head. Ralph sat by him, smiling in friendly manner. In the front door, which was wide open, stood Scholl, shading his eyes down the drive. A whirr of wheels and a shout came from outside, and a moment later Benham strode in. He began to question the obsequious Scholl, but stopped in amazement on catching sight of the Virginian and his erstwhile secretary.

"Well, old man," said Carter, struggling up and laughing as the situation cleared before him, "I guess you'll find your securities safe, after all."

"Good heavens, isn't this Carteret?" stammered Benham, bewildered.

"The same," said Carter, "but more heroically known as a simple member of the garrison. Mr. Ralph Nitton here, whom I commend to your attention, was the other."

Rapidly he explained what had occurred, offering an amended version that left few loose threads.

"But Ralph," exclaimed Benham; "what's he doing here?"

"Oh, Ralph's an old friend of mine," said Carter easily. "He knew I was staying in the town. He got wind of the plan to scoop your safe and arrived just

in time to pick me up. We came here together and managed to hold the fort."

Benham grasped a hand of each of the young men in speechless gratitude.

"By the way, where's the lad who had me down, Ralph?" asked Carter.

"Got clean away," said Ralph, returning his glance steadily. "I thought he was done for when I hit him with the poker, but while I was attending to you he must have recovered."

"And the other fellow?"

"No signs of him. Must have run after you shot him up. I think you winged him."

"Mr. Benham," said Carter whimsically, "if you're going to spend some years in jail you won't need a secretary, but if you're not, allow me to recommend this young man for the post."

"He can have more than that," exclaimed Benham enthusiastically. "I don't think I ever really knew you, Ralph, and if you'll let me try I'll undertake to bring your father around. I guess he never read his only son aright. As for jail, the whole thing depended on their hamstringing me."

And as Carter glanced from the man who was a towering giant in finance to the boy who would be one some day he was conscious of a good night's work and the fact that he had won two more pegs toward his goal.

CHAPTER XIII

A FLANK ATTACK

"I SHALL telegraph Maude Stuyver to come on Tuesday," said Mrs. Demaar.

"You don't mean Tuesday, do you? That's the day of the paper chase, you know," her husband objected mildly.

"Of course. How stupid of me! Wednesday, then. You'll stay over Wednesday, won't you, Mr. Carteret?" she called.

Robert Carter, occupied with a late breakfast, gave instant assent to his charming hostess, who looked in from the veranda with her question. She was selecting golf sticks preparatory to a foursome with Demaar and the Varicks. Others of the large house party had already scattered upon the vast estate, using the automobiles, the horses, the tennis courts, the shooting range, as suited each best. The Demaars had learned how to obtain the one thing they coveted, a constant contingent and a gay one in their huge house.

"Dear lady," said the Virginian gallantly, "I believe the only way you can ever get rid of me is through eviction proceedings."

"As if I didn't know you," she returned. "You'll be off some day on half an hour's notice and we won't see you again for six months. But you really must stay until Maude comes. Have you ever met her?"

Carter had met her, though it was not a matter that lent itself to discussion. "I think we have been introduced," he said briefly.

"A wonderful girl," put in Demaar. "So direct, so simple and wholehearted. I'm glad you're going to have her, Carrie."

"Perhaps I'd better not if she inspires you to that kind of idiocy," she answered tartly. "Fancy calling Maude simple! Why, she has absolutely perfect control of her two brothers. They jump through a ring or turn somersaults at command. No woman who can manage the Stuyver boys the way Maude does can be simple. However, she's a dear. I'll have James take the message when he drives down to the station."

Carter noted, and the first flash of a plan came to him. When the golf party was almost ready to start Mrs. Demaar looked in upon him again. "What have you in mind for this morning?" she asked.

"A hammock and that rare edition of Montaigne," he answered precisely.

"Well, if that's all I'll trouble you to make my excuses to Mr. Benham. He'll be down before noon, and it would be a dreadful nuisance if I had to leave the game to receive him. Charles, the butler, knows what room to give him."

Carter, sauntering into the drawing-room a few

moments later, heard the voices of the golf players as they left the veranda, then the clear tones of Mrs. Demaar delivering orders to some functionary. "The telegram is on the table in the entrance hall. Don't let James forget it." A respectful murmur gave answer.

Carter crossed quickly into the hall. Up to this instant he could not have said that he had a clear intention, but he acted now without hesitation. There was a long table in front of the rough stone fireplace. On it lay a yellow telegram form bearing the message to Maude Stuyver scribbled in broad, soft pencil. There were no sounds to announce the approach of the functionary. Carter knew that he was the only one of the guests remaining in the house. Swiftly, with deft fingers, he drew a pencil from his pocket, set the rubber nub upon the paper, neatly erased a word and substituted another, imitating Mrs. Demaar's hurried scrawl well enough. It was all done before the closing of a door at the rear warned him. He slipped into the library and picked up a book. A minute later Charles, the funereal butler, paced through the hall, picked up the telegram and departed. The machinery of the Virginian's little plot was started.

Benham came down in his automobile about eleven o'clock, and Carter greeted him on the steps. "Mrs. Demaar couldn't wait for you, old chap, so I volunteered. Just like her, isn't it?"

"I couldn't quite say you'd do as well, could I?" laughed Benham, with just a trace of embarrassment

in his manner as they shook hands. "But it is like Carrie."

For the next hour conversation was rather monotonous, but as they were walking the veranda Carter approached the subject which lay between them, and which, as he was conscious, his companion had deliberately avoided.

"And the country club?" the Virginian began.

"I—I'm awfully sorry, Carteret, old boy," said Benham, with real distress on his face. "I don't seem to be able to make it go."

"What's the use of throwing the veil of convention about the matter, Benham, as we've been doing for the last two months? What's gone wrong?"

"If I've been silent it was only because I found unexpected opposition. A man doesn't like to be told such things."

"Bosh! I can tell you now the reason why I am not a member of the Greenbough Country Club. The name of it is Stephen Stuyver. He's the only one on the membership committee who doesn't favor me. Am I right?" Benham nodded. "I've known it all along," Carter went on. "He's too old-fashioned. I never could make any impression on him. You haven't proposed me, then?"

"No. I made preliminary inquiry, to avoid embarrassment."

"May I ask you to propose me during the next month some time?"

"Surely, if you want to bring it to an issue."

"That's just what I want. Thanks, old fellow."

For the last year R. Pendleton Carteret might have been discerned hovering along the difficult line of approach that led within the gilded portals of the Greenbough Country Club. It was the wealthiest and one of the most exclusive among such organizations in the suburban territory. He had reached a point in his social campaign where clubs became necessary, and had finally selected this, with Benham as personal manager. For some time of late the conviction had grown upon him that Stuyver would prove an unsurmountable obstacle.

Tuesday, the day of the paper chase, brought a cloudless morning. The air was sweet and sharp, with a tang like sparkling wine, and the wind piped cheerily along the dry, brown Jersey hills and hollows. The trail had been laid for a ten-mile chase, with luncheon at the end. They were not to return until late in the afternoon.

As the young folks, in high spirits at the prospect of perfect weather and hard riding, moved out to the drive where the horses were waiting, Carter scattered his attentions so successfully that he was able to avoid attaching himself to any one for the day. When the cavalcade started with hallooing and the clatter of hoofs he dashed into the van. The chase led along the road for half a mile, then over a strip of meadow into the brown and crimson woods. Carter, pounding close after the leaders, found himself hidden by a turn from those who followed. He swung aside from the forest track and dashed into the denser growth. A hundred yards farther he pulled up and awaited

until the whole noisy troop swept past. Then he made his way sedately homeward. Near Lawncrest he dismounted and pried loose one of the horse's shoes. On returning he gave a picturesque description of the mishap to the stableman.

The morning train was due at the station, four miles distant, at nine o'clock. As he ensconced himself comfortably in a bamboo steamer chair on the veranda Carter pictured to himself events that would be taking place there within a few minutes. There was a combined lumber yard and livery stable in the village, with one rig. He remembered that distinctly. He had ascertained that there was no train back before noon. The Demaars had a telephone at Lawncrest, but it was a private number and he did not believe that Maude Stuyver knew it. Altogether, the situation promised well, and he settled to a peaceful hour with Montaigne.

Upon the bright peace of the autumn morning there arose a sharp complaint. Its note was vague at first, but persistent. Carter sat up expectantly. The sound resolved itself presently into a metallic whine, with a dull, spanking undertone. Carter smiled. From the edge of the boxwood hedge that concealed the road a vehicle hove into view, turning with deliberation through the gates and into the drive. It was the one ancient conveyance of the livery stable, with the one angular horse between the shafts and the one lanky driver on the seat. Back of him, very straight, very pink and very pretty, sat Maude Stuyver.

The Virginian was suddenly aware that the game would be difficult. There was a look in the girl's face that spoke warning. At the proper instant he descended the steps with the tolerant, good-natured smile he always wore in the presence of persons who did not like him.

"Here already, Miss Stuyver?" he said. "I had heard you were coming."

The girl's poise stiffened still more as she returned his bow. He held out a hand. She ignored it. "May I assist you?" he explained. She shook her head and stepped lightly from the dusty ark. The driver, one leg thrown over the side of the seat, grinned appreciatively at the little tableau. Miss Stuyver was not only angry but puzzled. She moved toward the steps, hesitated, and searched the verandas with snapping eyes. This was Carter's chance. Slipping around to the far side of the dilapidated conveyance he lifted two suit cases from under the seat. The driver, twisting about to observe him, had a vision of a yellow bill held almost under his nose and an energetic hand that signaled him the way to the gate. He grinned, winked, seized the bill and lifted the whip from the socket. Suddenly there was a snort, a crash, a rattle as of falling slats, and the carriage lurched forward.

"Who-a-a!"

Miss Stuyver turned in time to see her outfit spin around the circle of the drive in a cloud of dust and gravel, with the lanky liveryman tugging in apparent helplessness at the reins and the angular animal making miraculous speed. The creaking, hammer-

ing, protesting vehicle whirled dangerously around the turn to the road, making a dramatic and effective exit. Carter stared after the spectacle for a moment in silence.

"Seems to be a runaway," he remarked.

Miss Stuyver said nothing. Carter could not blame her. He could feel, as he had felt before, that there are times when the convention that places a ban upon certain expressions for the use of the gentler sex comes hard. Her face had changed from pink to white, and her little mouth was firm set. She glanced again at the empty verandas, the lawn, the walks. There was no one in sight—no one, that is, but R. Pendleton Carteret. The need was too great, and she turned upon him. He still smiled calmly.

"Can you extend me the slightest hint as to the meaning of all this?" she asked, and her voice was like the edge of a knife cut from ice. Carter took time to observe that he had never given her credit for being half so handsome as she was.

"I should be delighted to give you any information in my power," he bowed, picking up the suit cases and starting up the steps.

"Kindly leave them here," she said. He returned obediently. "Do you know where Mrs. Demaar is?"

"At this moment I should say she was somewhere about six miles to the west, but——"

"And Mr. Demaar?"

"Yes, he's along, too. You see——"

"Then there is no one at Lawncrest?"

"No one but myself. What I was trying to say is

that there's a paper chase on. My mount lost a shoe, so I returned."

Her eyes were suspiciously bright now, and her lips lost their determined hardness. She forgot, for the moment, that the one she addressed was R. Pendleton Carteret, a man who had been quietly swept into her own private little oblivion at a word from her brothers. "But this is incomprehensible," she broke out. "I had a telegram from Carrie telling me to come on the morning train to-day. Here it is."

She opened a purse and drew out a folded telegram, which she handed to him. He glanced at it. "Most extraordinary!" he exclaimed warmly. "It says Tuesday and the morning train. Some more of Carrie's forgetfulness. You mustn't hold it against her, Miss Stuyver. She's always doing something like this."

"Does that make it any less humiliating? When I reached the station there was no one to meet me. I meant to go straight back, but I would have had to wait three hours for a train. So I took the hack."

He permitted himself the corner of a smile and regretted it instantly. She stiffened again. "If you will permit me," he said, catching up the suit cases once more, "I'll escort you indoors. Charles will find you a room."

"Kindly leave them here," she repeated. He replaced them on the gravel and watched her uneasily. He had not counted upon any opposition. The object of his plan had been to have a quiet afternoon with her in a situation which would have thrown her more or less upon him for support. But a new resolution

was forming about her mouth. She stooped and picked up the suit cases. They were heavy, as the Virginian had discovered.

"I shall have to apologize for having taken up your time, Mr. Carteret," she said in the same icy tone she had used at first. "If you happen to recall it, you might inform Mrs. Demaar that I arrived according to her request. Good-morning." And she started away down the drive, head erect and preserving what dignity of manner she could with the two cumbersome bags hampering her stride. He stared stupidly after her for a moment, then stepped quickly in pursuit.

"But really, Miss Stuyver, I can't allow this, if you will pardon the liberty. Where do you intend to go?"

"I am going to the station," she answered slowly and distantly.

"The station! Why, it's all of four miles!"

"I will not require any further information, Mr. Carteret."

Perplexed, disappointed and conscious of the ludicrous failure of his plans, he followed her in silence to the lodge gates. There he halted her.

"Just wait a moment until I get a motor." As he started across the lawn she called to him:

"Don't get it on my account, Mr. Carteret. I shall not use it." He turned back.

"This is simple folly, Miss Stuyver. Let me send you some kind of a conveyance if my own presence is distasteful. One of the chauffeurs will take you over if you are still determined to go."

"Thank you. I shall not accept a motor or anything else. That is all, I think."

He held her with a hand upon her arm as she started again. "I really cannot allow it, Miss Stuyver."

"Do you presume to detain me, Mr. Carteret?" she said scornfully. But he saw now that there was no arguing; saw, too, a means by which he might yet in some measure pursue his course. Without answering he possessed himself of the suit cases. She did not resist, but a flash of surprise crossed her face. "I cannot——" she began.

"Allons, marche!" he cried gaily, and strode off along the dusty road toward the village. She hesitated a moment, as if disposed to combat his continued interference, then fell in step beside him, chin up and a careful expression of cold indifference upon her face.

They walked a mile without exchanging a word. Stinging clouds of dust, driven before the fresh autumn breeze, circled and swept about them. The Virginian's strength began to fag under the dragging weight of the bags. He stopped and set them down, rubbing his chafed palms together with a smile. "Just a little out of training, I guess," he said cheerfully. "I must take up my sculling again." He noted with relief that the deliberate hardness of her mouth had gone. There was just a tinge of sympathy in her voice as she glanced at his scored and reddened hands.

"If you had let me do as I wished you would be normally comfortable at this moment."

"And how about you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Suppose you let me go on now. At least, I can carry them for a few minutes," she added as he shook his head. He had been studying this young woman, as it was his custom to study all persons, women most of all. It was the fact that he could win and charm most of them if he had leisure and opportunity that had led him to form his little plot. Something in her glance, in her manner, gave him here the intuitive touch of understanding, the key that he had missed up to now.

As they walked on he began very gradually to exhibit the faintest limp. At first it was scarcely perceptible, though he felt her eyes upon him from time to time. When they had covered another quarter of a mile it was more pronounced. She halted suddenly and a pace farther he turned in surprise. His face was drawn, and the look of it startled her.

"You are suffering," she cried impulsively. He produced an obviously forced smile.

"Oh, no! My hands are a little raw, that's all."

"But you are lame!"

"Lame? Absurd, Miss Stuyver! Come, let's push on. You'll miss that noon train if we don't hurry."

The warning silenced her, and they resumed the march. For some distance he bore himself carefully, walking with precision. Then at intervals the limp reasserted itself. He was thinking rapidly. They had covered more than half the distance. He had proved to his own satisfaction that he had struck the

right track with Maude Stuyver. An exclamation from his companion brought them to another halt.

"Mr. Carteret, this is really far enough. I cannot permit you to make a martyr of yourself. You are in pain."

"Miss Stuyver," he said, wearily but with firmness, "I am interested in but one thing. You wish to catch the train. That's enough for me. The train it is. My own affairs do not enter into the problem. We are wasting time." He trudged on again, making no effort to conceal the limp. Once, glancing furtively toward her, he read pity and indecision in her face. They came to a sharp bend in the road.

"There is a short cut here, Miss Stuyver," he said. "The road turns below and leads over the bridge. By proceeding through this clump of woods we can cross the stream on stepping-stones and get to the road again. It's a quarter of a mile saved."

He led the way without further comment, and Maude followed meekly. She was beginning to readjust her opinion of this handsome young man, who was so thoroughly a gentleman and was serving her so unselfishly. And she knew—she knew—he was suffering. She clenched her hands at the thought of it.

The path wound out of the woods at the verge of a little ravine, where a silver-green brook twisted and danced among the stones. Carter started down the incline briskly. Maude did not quite see what happened. But suddenly he gave a sharp cry, his left

knee went limp, he stumbled, wavered and pitched headlong down the bank.

He lay very white and still among the stones and dead leaves and waving grasses, one of the suit cases under him and one across his knees. He felt that he had done it well—rather too well. There was a cut on his forehead and sundry bruises upon his limbs that were not absolutely essential to realism. But he comforted himself with the certainty that he had achieved an artistic triumph. Maude Stuyver had come nobly to the front. After the first terrified scream she had scrambled after him. Now she was bending over him, bathing his temples with a handkerchief moistened in the brook. He could hear her pitying, broken murmur, and the touch of her hands was soft and gentle. The scamp had the grace to flush a little under her tender solicitude.

“Oh!” she exclaimed when he opened his eyes, “I’m so glad! Are you—are you badly hurt?” He sat up and began to feel his left ankle, wincing in a way that wrung her. She watched him with wide eyes, from which all trace of hostility and defiance had vanished.

“Well,” he said weakly, “you’d better hurry if you’re going to catch that train.” She stared a moment, not comprehending. Then:

“That unkind, Mr. Carteret. You don’t think I’d leave you here. Is it very serious?”

“No, it’s nothing.” His hurried manner was sufficient contradiction. “But—I’m sorry—it’s my bad ankle. I hurt it again this morning when I was

thrown during the paper chase. I'm really afraid I can't go on."

"Of course not. You mustn't suggest such a thing."

"But there's the train."

"Bother the train."

"With all my heart." They were smiling now, the girl eagerly seeking amends for her indifference and coldness to the injured man who had been so brave and uncomplaining and had suffered through acquiescence in her whim. He lowered the tension easily, leading the conversation away from their situation by skilful play. With his peculiar charm and facility he began a discussion of people and events in the world which was hers by birth and which he had forced and made his own. It was the hour he had counted upon, and he made the most of it.

As he had divined, she was frank, impulsive, warm in her sympathies, quick to answer an appeal, and loyal in her friendships. What his chivalry and unfailing courtesy had won his ready tongue and tact held as undisputed ground. After a time he looked at his watch.

"You've missed the train. What's to do now?"

"I don't know," she said, looking blank. "What would you suggest?"

"Suggest? You'll find me ready enough at that. I'm one of the best little suggesters you ever saw. But no one ever follows the suggestions."

"I will," she broke out.

"You will?"

She nodded. "That's the least I can do after what you've done and tried to do for me."

"Well, look here. Carrie isn't to blame. She's not responsible for these things—she really isn't. When she learns what's happened she'll be absolutely and miserably unhappy. If you think you owe me anything, or are grateful, or anything like that—all bosh, of course—why, let's get up a little conspiracy to save her punishment for her oversight. Shall we?"

He was like a big, pleading boy, and as he finished he winced pathetically and touched his ankle. "But what can we do?" she asked doubtfully.

"It's easy enough. James will be coming along here in the dogcart within a few hours to meet the mail train at three o'clock. You'll be out of sight, and I'll stop him and induce him to go back on foot, offering to get the mail myself. I'll tell him I want to take a drive or something. Then in due time I'll drive you up to the house. You came down on the mail train, and I found you disconsolate at the station. Carrie'll be too tickled to ask questions."

"But can you get to the road?"

"Yes," he said, setting his teeth very firmly; "yes, I'll do it some way."

"And you really want me to?"

"I beg you to."

"It's very nice of you to ask a favor for Carrie," she said. She wondered how she had overlooked the fact that Mr. Carteret was perfectly delightful.

"Is it?" he answered innocently. "Well, Carrie de-

serves it." After a few moments she spoke reflectively:

"Do you know Stephen, my elder brother?"

"Not—very well," he said gently. "I don't believe Stephen quite appreciates all my bright and various virtues."

"He never understood you," she said directly and with so much conviction that he flushed again.

"There is no one with whom I would rather be on friendly terms," he observed with perfect truthfulness.

"I'm going to get Carrie to have him down in a day or two," was her apparently irrelevant comment.

And as Carter settled back with a sigh upon the two suit cases, a cigarette between his fingers, ready for a pleasant wait until James and the dogcart should come, he seemed to see the gilded portal of the Greenbough Country Club through the cloud of blue smoke. And the gates were open.

CHAPTER XIV

AN AMBUSCADE

CARTER could not be sure at first that it was Jerry Coskar, but he saw that the man whose face had put him on the alert slipped away toward the rear of the house through the brilliant, thronging rooms. He moved slowly in that direction, keeping careful watch as he exchanged salutations or stopped a moment with an acquaintance.

He had rather expected some difficulty. This was Marion Keith's wedding night. Coskar could still make trouble over the schoolgirl affair she had had with him, and he was not so entirely discredited in the world of gold and purple that he no longer dared show his face in a crowd. The Virginian caught one more glimpse of the face in the second room and was convinced. When he reached the last room the man he was trailing had disappeared. And that meant action.

He returned to the entrance hall. Dorothea Pul-sain was standing on the lower stairs. Dorothea was to be one of the bridesmaids, and he could not have asked a better ally. He stepped up just below her.

“Where is Marion?” he asked eagerly.

"With her gown," was the calm young woman's all-sufficing answer.

"Listen, please. It is very important that I should see her. No. Please don't waste time being cynical or superior. I'll grant you all the sharp effects you could make without a struggle. There is something she should 'know immediately.'"

"Excellent," returned Dorothea, without moving. "What should she know? That her romantic fiancé is wearing a new chestnut wig in her honor, or that he will support his declining years to the altar on crutches?"

"I knew you'd do it," said Carter indignantly.

"Well, what do you expect?"

"I expect your aid. What if it is out of the way? I wouldn't have come to you if it had been an ordinary matter, would I?"

She regarded him with more interest. "You are a discerning young man, Mr. Carteret. If I understand you, you wish to hold parley with a girl who is just about to be married, who is now the most important person in the house, and who is at this moment the center of a whirling system of excited maids, relatives and friends. Is that all?"

He nodded, and she broke her graceful pose against the balustrade. "Well, to do the thing properly you will have to use the rear staircase, as they do in all dark and romantic intrigues. You can take your chances with the servants."

She glided away toward the upper floor, and he turned back along the hall. It was an old-fashioned

double mansion, in proper accord with the moss-hung name and ancient fortune of the Keiths. The house belonged to Marion's crabbed old uncle, who had happily loaned it for the occasion, since Mrs. Keith had no adequate quarters of her own. He had established as a precedent condition to the loan that the ceremony should be held in the gilded reception-room, where such affairs took place when he was young. Society found the aged house and the faded appointments amusing and quaint. The Keiths were really "in," whatever their eccentricity, so there was nothing more to be said.

Carter found the rear stairs and climbed in the black well to the next landing, where he waited with the door held ajar. She came presently, and he stepped forward to meet her. In the faint glow of the hall lamp the sheen of white that fell about her, the fair, pale face, the firm, young shoulders—all her gracious figure seemed to hold a distinct radiance. Never had he seen her so beautiful, and a thought swept him for a moment—the thought that he had once read the signal in her eyes and that something had answered within him. He was sharply conscious, too, of the months that had passed since he had been with her, and of the fact that those months had been the last of her girlhood. Only for a moment, and the old, leaping flame was smothered once more. He found himself speaking before he had quite regained his balance.

"Jerry Coskar is here," he began abruptly. "Have you heard from him again?"

Her face was whiter than the high lights of her gown as she looked at him. He knew, with the strange understanding which bound him to this woman, that it was the sudden sight of him rather than his words that sent the color from her cheeks and brought one hand faltering to her throat. He repeated his question. She shook her head slowly and answered in a low voice:

"No. I've never heard from him since the time—
you kept him from——"

"Blackmailing you." Carter took the word from her quickly and went on. "He was not invited, by any chance?"

"No."

"I knew that, of course. But he's here, and I'm very much mistaken if his backer and friend who aided him in the former affair is not within call. Fortunately they did not have an opportunity to recognize me when I took that foolish letter of yours from them."

"But they surely could not intrude here."

"I don't know why not. Coskar isn't one you could throw out. And St. Geoffry is hardly likely to show himself until it's their cue to make trouble. Meanwhile they've found some means of entrance, for I saw Jerry."

"Do you think they mean mischief, then?"

"What else? Curiosity would scarcely draw them here at such a time. They are entirely capable of any move that will mean money. Speaking bluntly, I should say that you will hear from them before the

ceremony and that they will attempt to extort the promise of a large sum. Failing in that they mean to make a scene that will tear New York apart tomorrow. You best know how they can compass it."

She understood the danger now. She stretched out a hand to the wall for support. The helpless gesture thrilled him and the warmth sprang unbidden in his breast. If he let matters take their course he could trust the schemer, St. Geoffry, to make trouble, with a very fair chance in prospect that the marriage would be prevented. There was little to say in favor of that marriage. Osterman, the zinc king, was more than three times the age of his promised bride. Mrs. Keith and the millions formed the explanation for the match. And even now it might not be too late; he might have Marion himself.

But interest, the cold, unwavering instinct of success which had borne him through his long and difficult progress from terrace to upper terrace toward the social heights, did not point that way. He had fought that battle out once, and it was over. What cold interest further whispered he would not permit himself to hear clearly. He was fully aware, however, that Marion Keith with the Osterman millions would be wholly desirable—and Osterman's age—Clearly the wedding must go on, and it must be his to aid it.

"I should advise you, Miss Keith," he said, with no trace of the emotion that had shaken him, "to tell Mr. Osterman the full details of that unfortunate incident with Coskar as soon after the ceremony as possible.

Let him know of that letter and of the attempts to victimize you. I do not think you need fear anything then. The danger lies within the next two hours. In the meanwhile, if you receive any communication from Coskar ignore it. And keep close in your room until the last moment."

She showed that she heard, but she did not move. The Virginian knew that she was waiting for some word, some gesture from him. He merely bowed and withdrew through the door of the rear staircase. As he started down he heard the soft rustle of her dress along the hall, and a strange little fancy obtruded that that sound was the last thing he should have of her before she passed into the keeping of another.

Down in the crowded rooms again he renewed his search for Coskar. He even asked one or two young men casually if they had seen Jerry, but obtained no aid. After making the round of the rooms twice he came to the conclusion that the unbidden guest had found a place of retreat, and that close at hand. He was in the rear parlor at the moment and his glance was fixed upon the draped archway leading into the large conservatory. The glass doors beyond were open and the interior was dark. He walked over and stood close to the portières.

As he watched the animated, interweaving figures of the company with a conventional, set smile, his attention was concentrated upon the space behind him. He heard rapid steps, and as he moved off Jerry Coskar stepped swiftly through the conservatory door and mingled with the throng.

It was a risk to assume that the coast was clear with his departure. Carter had a firmly settled notion that the wayward sprig of financial aristocracy did not possess of himself the resolution to carry out this invasion. St. Geoffry was probably not far away. But some instant knowledge of the plan was necessary, and he took the risk. He brushed against the curtains, turned into the shadow behind them and found himself in the cool darkness of the greenhouse. He was able to press in without too much noise behind one of the glass doors, where a bank of shrubs screened him.

Coskar was not absent long. From his hiding place Carter saw the young man returning, glancing anxiously this way and that as if in search of some one. The Virginian wondered if the one he sought could be St. Geoffry—or Osterman! Coskar approached the doorway, sauntered a moment with a glance over his shoulder, and came in close in front of the hidden watcher.

He passed on down the central aisle to the rear. Again Carter waited. A pale light pervaded the conservatory, the light of luminous clouds above. As his eyes became accustomed to the dusk, peering through the fronds and foliage he could make out the bulging bay of the end of the structure. There came the sharp creak of a rusty hinge.

Cautiously he drew out of his corner and began to work among the tubs and pots and crowded shelves, through the tangle of branches and blossoms. Sounds of scraping came from the bay. Carter stopped and,

parting the screen of growth, looked out. In the gloom he could make out a kneeling figure. One of the window sections, hinged at the top, was thrust outward, and beyond was the head of another figure.

As he watched the figure outside flung an overcoat and a hat over the sill and climbed up and in. Both figures rose to their feet and propped the window wide with its side bar.

“Has Osterman come yet?” The low question was from the new intruder. And the Virginian knew that he had been right and that his old enemy, Arnold St. Geoffry, was in the game.

“Not yet,” answered Coskar in the same tone. “I’ve looked for him twice. I’ve learned where Marion’s room is—southeast corner on the next floor.”

“Good. Now get word to her. Here’s the note, if you have to use it. Bribe a maid, or, if necessary, force your way to her room. She must have the message before she starts down. Get the best kind of an answer you can, in writing, if possible. Never mind how badly you scare her, Jerry—you’re so damnable soft.”

“Will you stay here?”

“I’ll be here, and if it comes to a hitch I’m going to take part.”

“You wouldn’t show yourself?” asked Coskar, with a note of alarm.

“Why not? No one I need actually fear, I fancy. However, I shan’t unless she won’t hear reason.”

Coskar left him, and under cover of his progress

through the place Carter retraced his own steps among the plants toward the door. He waited until a group of guests stopped, chatting and laughing, near the archway. Then, judging that St. Geoffry must have drawn back in the bay lest some were about to enter the conservatory, he gained the shadow of the curtain and from there the parlor.

Carter made his way instantly to the entrance hall and drew up at the side of a tall, chunky-shouldered man, stiffly immaculate in attire and aggressively barbered in appearance. The Virginian talked to him rapidly, but with no apparent effect. He did not even glance at Carter, but kept a stony gaze fixed upon the chandelier. The murmured monologue continued for some minutes. At its conclusion Carter walked away, leaving the tall man to his stolid inspection of the electric bulbs.

The Virginian was about to mount the rear staircase again when a sudden idea arrested him, a possible improvement upon the plan he had made. He moved once more through the crowd to the last parlor. To the left of the conservatory entrance were closed folding-doors, leading, as he supposed, into the dining-room. Quite casually, as if on some mission connected with the event, he opened these, slipped through and closed them after him. He found himself in the breakfast-room. It was empty and lighted by a single globe. Toward the front of the house it gave, in turn, upon the dining-room.

On a massive sideboard stood a dozen pieces of heavy silver, Keith heirlooms. Carter wrenched open

the bottom drawer of the sideboard and selected a small tablecloth. Holding this by the corners as a bag he carefully placed in it the smaller pieces of silver. He could not manage two heavy candelabras and left them in their places. From an upper drawer he took a handful of forks and spoons and disposed them in his hip pockets. Tying up the bundle carelessly he slung it out of sight under the table. Then he returned the way he had come and started up the rear staircase.

He heard voices before he had mounted halfway to the landing, and the timbre of one of them brought him the rest of the way three steps at a time. The door into the hall was ajar. Marion Keith stood where he had last seen her and in the same attitude, one hand against the wall and the other at her throat. Before her, leering into her face, was Jerry Coskar.

"Do you want that? We'll do it if you refuse—I swear we will. You'd best promise, I tell you——"

Carter's right hand shot out tensely and he gripped the speaker about the neck from behind. He swung Coskar back and completed his throttling hold, pinning the intruder against the door. Some one was calling the girl. There was no need of Carter's energetic nod to send her, wide-eyed and trembling, back to her room. The Virginian dragged his prey out to the dark landing of the rear staircase, thrust him down on the steps and then relaxed his grip. Coskar gurgled for breath, but a warning pressure checked his cry. Carter sank beside him.

"It's no use, Jerry, it'll be much more comfortable

if you keep still." Coskar ceased struggling, and Carter went on amicably: "Of course, my boy, it's none of my business why you're here or what you do after you leave. But one thing is dead sure. Your activities for the night are over. You can thank your family name that it's no worse. Which is it, the police, or will you be quiet?"

Jerry signified that the latter alternative would be his choice, and Carter led his captive downstairs. There were a few persons in the hall, but they did not notice the two men. The Virginian opened the door of a small closet under the main staircase. Coskar would have hung back. "It's that or the police," said Carter, and the other walked in. Carter turned the key upon him and put it in his pocket.

Commotion and the rising hum of conversation through the crowd betokened preparations for the ceremony. Glancing up Carter saw a slim white figure, clothed in radiance, above him. He hurried through to the rear, meeting and dodging the crowd that was moving to the big reception-room. The orchestra's subdued harmony came to his ears as he reached the last room. He placed himself opposite the black entrance to the conservatory and waited, watchful and ready.

He knew that St. Geoffry would move unless he had word from Coskar before the wedding march began. But he looked for a swifter climax than that. Suddenly aware that he presented an excellent target alone in the middle of the room he drew a little aside, leaving a clear way from the conservatory to the

breakfast-room doors. A ringing tinkle of glass sounded from the greenhouse, then the thump of some solid body and the crash of overturned flower pots. From the black void of the archway between the portières a man dashed into view, like a figure thrown sharply upon a blank screen.

It was St. Geoffry, shirt bosom awry, clothes disarranged and stained with garden mold. He stopped suddenly in the flood of light and looked through the connecting rooms toward the front, where the wedding was now in progress. And then he saw Carter. He glared a moment without recognition. The Virginian returned the stare calmly. The Englishman smiled.

"I see," he observed. "Quite effective."

Heavy footsteps came from inside the conservatory, and at the same moment St. Geoffry leaped across the room to the sliding-doors of the breakfast-room. Carter did not seek to detain him, but retained his position, guarding the reception-room. The Englishman thrust one of the doors aside and disappeared, closing the entrance after him. Then another figure flashed from the darkness of the conservatory. It was the tall, chunky-shouldered man to whom Carter had spoken in the hall. His immaculate attire had suffered with his barbered finish, and his face was flushed.

"Which way?" he demanded.

"In there, Tobin," said Carter, pointing to the breakfast-room. "He can't get away. How did you miss him?"

"Jumped for me like a cat while I was getting through the window," puffed Tobin. "He's a tough one. Lucky he has no gun."

"Did you place your men?"

"One's in the dining-room and another in the kitchen, as you said."

"The first is probably having his troubles," said Carter. "You'd better close in."

Tobin, revolver in hand, slid one of the doors aside with extreme caution and looked into the breakfast-room. After reconnoitering a moment he advanced through the opening. But Carter did not follow. He ran into the conservatory, straight down the central aisle. In the bay the window was still raised, and over the sill lay St. Geoffry's coat and hat. Carter took the silver forks and spoons from his pockets and placed them in the coat. Then, carrying his evidence, he started for the breakfast-room.

It was a strange spectacle that confronted him. Across the threshold of the dining-room was sprawled one of Tobin's men, supporting himself on one arm and gazing with a stupid expression at his chief. There was a broad cut on his forehead. This was the guard who had stood between the conspirator and the front of the house, where the wedding party was gathered. Tobin himself was in the middle of the room with leveled revolver.

On the opposite side of the table, with his back to the wall, was St. Geoffry. Over his shoulder he held one of the heavy silver candelabras, battered out of semblance to its graceful companion piece. With this

strange weapon he had attacked the prostrate detective and with it he now stood at bay. Carter had always known the Englishman for a fighter, and once more he gave the reckless adventurer and criminal a mental tribute.

St. Geoffry was still smiling, but his smile was not pleasant to see. His coat had been almost torn from his back in the struggle with the dining-room guard. He was breathing hard, and his glance slipped past Tobin to Carter with a malignant light.

"Put that down," said Tobin quietly.

"Come and take it," taunted St. Geoffry.

"Put it down, or I'll shoot," continued the detective.

"Oh, no, you won't," said the other with a sneer. "A fine scandal you'd make of it. Osterman wedding performed to the tune of pistol shots? Try something else, my man."

"What's the use, St. Geoffry?" said Carter, advancing. "He'll have to shoot if you try to get away, no matter what comes of it. You're too wise to try a chance like that."

"I don't know but what you're right, my honey boy from Dixie," said St. Geoffry after a pause. He lowered his weapon. "And by the way, I'd like to know the meaning of this," he went on in a loftier tone. "I find a man crawling in the conservatory window. He attacks me. I go for help and a second ruffian tackles me. Tobin, my friend, if that's your name, what charge can you make against me?"

The detective, uneasy, glanced at Carter. "No

trouble about the charge, Tobin," said the Virginian. "Here's his coat, pockets stuffed with valuables. And what about this?" He stooped, drew the bundle of silver from under the table and clinked it with a smile. A flash of fury crossed St. Geoffry's face. He swung up his candelabra with a scream and dashed at Carter. But the Virginian was too quick for him. From his stooping position he hurled himself forward. He struck St. Geoffry low with his shoulder and the futile blow wrenched the grotesque weapon from the Englishman's hands. As the two span and struggled furiously Tobin caught St. Geoffry's wrist and there was the snap of steel springs.

A moment later Carter, slightly disheveled, but quite presentable, passed through the dining-room and into the entrance hall. From the closet under the stairs he released a pale and shrinking young man, whom he escorted to the front door. There, while a surprised flunky ushered out this strange guest who wore neither coat nor hat, Carter shook hands with him and assured him that he hoped to have the pleasure of seeing him again.

As the Virginian turned back the closing strains of the Mendelssohn march came from the reception-room, and he entered to find the guests crowding about the newly married pair. Carter passed with the others and shook hands with Osterman, who made a surprisingly young and gallant figure as a bridegroom. The next instant he was holding Marion's hand in his own, and as he murmured his congratu-

lations a little pressure was his thanks. For the fraction of an instant the tiny flame flickered within him. Then a dashing and effusive matron swept him aside.

“All best wishes, dear Mrs. Osterman.”

CHAPTER XV

A SHARP RALLY

ROBERT CARTER stood staring at the bulletin board in the corridor of the Wampum Club. And as he stood, with fixed gaze and expressionless, hard-set face, he was trying to adjust himself to the vital blow he had suffered within the hour. Ralph Nitton walked the length of the gold and marble hall and halted at his side without attracting his attention.

"Well, what profit?" asked Nitton, after waiting vainly for some sign of recognition. "Looking for money or trouble?" The Virginian turned an abstracted glance upon the other and nodded.

"Why duplicate your terms? As a matter of fact, my son," he said languidly, "I've been on this spot for some fifteen minutes, and I haven't read a single notice on that board yet."

"Good," said Nitton, who was all of six months younger than Carter. "You mean you've actually discovered a way of passing a quarter of an hour without the slightest exertion of any kind. Oh, happiness! Let me in on it, old man," he added whimsically, imitating the Virginian's pose and steady stare.

"No go, Carteret," he yawned after a moment. "You've kept back part of the formula. All I can see is a lot of confounded notices of governors' meetings and lost scarfpins and watch fobs. I say, it looks as if every one had been sowing the place with articles of personal adornment, doesn't it? There's a suggestion, now. Perhaps one might obtain some amusement from that."

"Are you really so hard put to it for a means of distraction?" asked Carter with a smile.

"Desperately. Do you know, I haven't been interested in anything for three months. I never thought it would be so beastly dull to come into a fortune." He shrugged his shoulders with an air of weariness that brought a deeper curve to Carter's lips.

"Have you been watching the ticker to-day?" asked the Virginian suddenly.

"Good heavens, no! Why should I?"

"Slate Mountain is off twenty points."

"I'm afraid I don't know the signals," said Nitton, shaking his head. "Ought that to interest me?"

"Well, you're worth about three million dollars less this afternoon than you were last night."

"Really!" exclaimed the other. "That's grateful news."

"Unfortunately, I can't adopt your refreshing and wholly admirable attitude toward the matter," returned Carter quietly. "It so happens that about all I possess is wrapped up in neat packages of Slate Mountain securities. The thought that held me before this fascinating board was how soon my name

would appear there as dropped from membership for non-payment of dues."

"By Jove! do you mean you're wiped out?"

"Practically." Carter paused to light a cigarette. "You will observe that the whole thing is most annoying. I had passed my days of speculation and with every virtuous intention I planted my modest competence in Slate Mountain as a safe and conservative place of storage. Whereupon I foreswore the pursuit of fortune and accepted my dividends with tranquil mind. And this is my reward."

"And you can take it as coolly as that?" Ralph looked his friend over with abject envy and admiration. Such nerve and poise in the face of disaster awed him a little and completely captured and dominated his errant imagination. He thrust out a hand impulsively. "Let me help, won't you, Carteret? You say I'm involved, too. I'm glad of it. Perhaps we can do something together."

"Thanks, old man," said Carter simply, dropping his tone of easy banter and returning the clasp. The loss he had suffered was fully as severe as he had given Nitton to understand. Without warning he had found himself hamstrung. Affairs had gone well with him of late. His membership in the Wampum had placed one more official seal upon his social aspirations. And now suddenly his secure seat sank beneath him and he must fight again for the first of all essentials to his purpose—the money with which to live his part.

He sought out Gatz-Brown, the shrewd financier

who had helped him out of more than one tight corner, that evening and pressed him for some hint as to the situation. Gatz-Brown chuckled in all his round little person at the request.

"Why don't you see Vebbe? He lives here at the Wampum."

"It's not official information I want. I'd like to know what they're saying or thinking about this move in Slate Mountain."

"Two very different things. Most of 'em say its another attack by Granson. Heard of the old feud between Granson and Vebbe, haven't you? He's hammering it, I guess."

"What kind of man is Vebbe?" asked the Virginian.

"Big man. Succeeded his father as president of the Slate Mountain. Diogenes of the street."

"I suppose Granson could make his attack pay?"

"Pay? Ha, ha! I should guess. Slate Mountain is a parallel and competing road to one of his pet ventures. If he could get it he'd wring the substance from its resources in a flood of water. He'd probably wreck it later on for the benefit of his larger system."

"But where do the stockholders come in?"

"They come in with Vebbe. He couldn't be pried loose from the control with a crowbar."

Carter learned more during the week. The developments in Slate Mountain afforded the sensation of a year. It was generally accepted that the move was a particularly vicious bear raid led by J. Thomas

Granson, and the old story of the quarrel between that dashing manipulator and Marius Vebbe was revamped for the edification of the public. In well informed circles it was believed that the road was perfectly safe, and that the stock would ultimately recover. Slate Mountain had been a Vebbe property since it was built, and the control had never passed from the hands of the family and a group of close associates.

But as each day brought a further sag uneasy rumors began to find currency even among the market wise. Vebbe, it was said, had permitted himself to make openly pessimistic predictions. It was even reported that he had advised certain friends to sell for a further decline, although this could not be verified. The suggestion was beyond belief.

Carter, when he had gathered this much, was not content to wait passively for further results. The squabbles of Wall Street were nothing to him. His future was seriously threatened, that future toward which every act and thought had builded through his long apprenticeship. With the direct impulse of a man who shatters convention and diplomacy under primitive fear for his life, he approached Vebbe boldly one afternoon in the smoking-room of the Wampum Club. The railroad president was a portly gentleman of heavy manner and heavy face. His cloak of impressive dignity sat well upon him, and he was not an individual with whom one would lightly take a liberty. The consciousness of power, wealth and honored name hung about him. He glanced up in

cold surprise as the Virginian drew a chair to his side.

"It's about Slate Mountain, Mr. Vebbe," began Carter rather diffidently. "I'm just a stockholder, you know. But I thought perhaps you might give me a word of advice."

While he spoke he was uncomfortably aware that Vebbe was not looking him in the face. The president's eyes were fixed upon his shirt bosom. Carter glanced down instinctively, but his pearl studs were in place, and he resumed:

"I was naturally uneasy."

"There is no need for uneasiness," answered Vebbe distantly. "I look upon the condition as temporary." Still he did not raise his eyes to meet those of the Virginian. Carter was interested.

"Do you think that it will go lower?"

"I cannot say." The answer was frosty and there was no shift in the glance. Carter became restless and abandoned his attempt. When he moved away it was some time before he could rid himself of the feeling that there was something wrong with his immaculate shirt front.

For the next four weeks he kept quiet watch upon Vebbe's movements, tabulating his comings and his goings. One afternoon he dragged Ralph Nitton from the billiard-room with an imperative wave.

"Is your automobile outside, Ralph?"

"Yes. My racer is waiting."

"Then get me a coat and cap. We have a trip to make."

A few minutes later they were sitting in Ralph's car, muffled against the keen November air. Just ahead of them in the waiting line of automobiles against the curb was a large machine with black limousine, unobtrusive and solemnly respectable. Presently it moved out of place and drew up before the entrance to the club. Almost immediately the swinging door gave exit to a stout, bundled figure that hurried across the sidewalk and entered the automobile. The machine moved off.

"Now, my son," said Carter comfortably, "all we've got to do is to keep that car in sight."

Ralph threw over the levers and they glided out through the side street and into the press of Fifth Avenue traffic. Lights were winking up as they slid smoothly along from block to block.

North and still further north they swept, to the end of the park, west to Broadway, and then again north. Ralph was puzzled. "Give a fellow a hint, Carteret," he pleaded. "Who is it we're dodging, and why?"

"The gentleman in the machine ahead is Marius Vebbe," answered the Virginian. "As to why, the only truthful answer is I don't know. A whim, a chance, nothing more solid."

They lapsed into silence again, and still they sped to the north, past Manhattanville, over the rise of Washington Heights. It was dark now. Suddenly Carter laid a hand on Ralph's arm, and the racer came to an abrupt halt. Three blocks ahead the limousine had drawn out to the left and was climbing

a gentle incline. At Carter's word they left the car in charge of the chauffeur and continued the chase on foot. Following the side road they could see the lights of a residence among the trees beyond.

"Have you any idea where we are?" asked Carter.

"This must be Granson's place," said Nitton. "I've often heard that he has some sort of a feudal hangout and a big art gallery out toward Inwood."

"Granson!" exclaimed Carter excitedly. "Do you realize what you are saying?"

"No. What?"

"Why, if what you say is true we've trailed Vebbe to the home of his hereditary enemy."

"By Jove, you're right! The Vebbe-Granson feud, of course. What's he doing here?"

"Let's find out first if he is here."

They hastened around the curve of the incline. Ahead they could make out the brilliant eyes of an automobile before the low, vague mass of the residence. Carter led his companion off the road, and they circled toward the rear. Cautiously they crept up through a crackling hedge and a withered garden. The house was surrounded by a broad, high veranda, and the windows toward the front on the first floor were above the heads of the watchers. They were brightly lighted.

Carter drew off his automobile coat and caught the trunk of a tree that stood at the edge of the gravel path. A moment later he was settled in the fork. Ralph crouched below him, tremendously disappointed that he could not have a glimpse through the

windows. By the glow from within he could make out the figure of the Virginian as he peered into the house.

"Vebbe," came Carter's sibilant message.

"And Granson, too," he added a moment later. There was a period of silence, and then Nitton heard a stifled exclamation from above.

"What is it?" he called up anxiously.

There was a murmured response that he could not make out. Then Carter dropped beside him and, catching his arm, drew him swiftly away over the route by which they had come. Ralph questioned him eagerly when they were once more in the automobile speeding south, but the other was strangely evasive.

"What was going on? What did you see? I don't think it's decent of you, Carteret, to make use of me and then wrap yourself up in mystery like this," complained Nitton petulantly.

"It would do no good," said Carter, driven at length to a definite answer. "We know the essential fact now. Vebbe is working with Granson. That means treachery, treachery to the Slate Mountain. It can mean nothing else. We've found the explanation for the decline, and that's a pretty big piece of information.

"But we're handling dynamite, Ralph. Don't tempt me to be indiscreet. I saw something, as you guessed, that seemed remarkable to me. It was more than that, it was astounding. I know that I can use it; I feel the significance it must have. But I don't

see my way yet. Give me time. I've got to work on this. You have only a slice at stake, but I'm playing for my last cent."

At the opening of the market next day Slate Mountain fell three more points. Rumors had steadily gained ground that the road was in bad shape. The skeptical who had seen only a tactical movement in the first drop had begun to give ear to persistent and apparently well-founded tales of falling receipts and poor condition. It might be, as a very few intimated, that these reports were being skilfully circulated in the interests of Granson. But the appearance of disease was convincing.

Carter was standing in front of the bulletin board once more when he came to his decision. Ralph Nitton hailed him in passing through the corridor.

"Well, what is it this time?" he began cheerily.

"Ralph," said the Virginian, wheeling on him suddenly, "it's trouble this time. Will you help me again to-night? I think I'm ready to act now."

"Right there with you, Carteret. Another expedition?"

"No, this little affair will be a set piece. First I want you to help me interest Stanchfield in what we know and what we suspect. He's lost heavily on Slate Mountain, and he's been worrying. We need him with us."

Together they tracked down Stanchfield. Ralph, who knew him better, opened their proposal. As losers by a mysterious and treacherous deal they were to work in common. Carteret had a plan in view that

promised results, and would he lend a hand? Stanchfield listened sympathetically, though with little faith, and agreed to place himself at the Virginian's disposal in making an investigation.

On the second floor of the clubhouse the writing-room was approached from the main corridor by a wide hall that led through a little Moorish lounging-room, like a halfway station. The wall of the Moorish room toward the front of the building gave upon a narrow sun parlor. The doorway into the sun parlor, which was abandoned and unlighted at night, was covered by a heavy Oriental curtain.

Just after the dinner hour Carter led his two accomplices to this place and explained that they were to take their stand in the parlor, behind the curtain. From this position, while screened, they could watch every one who passed in and out of the writing-room, with the Moorish room as their stage.

Stanchfield did not approve of this proceeding and was persuaded with difficulty to take up the post of a spy upon friends and fellow club members. Carter held him by promising that he would not be called to the curtain until the time came for the clearing of the Virginian's mystery. Ralph was tremendously excited, but was content to obey orders. About nine o'clock the little playlet began. A page passed through the Moorish room toward the writing-room, calling monotonously:

"Mr. Vebbe. Mr. Vebbe. 'Phone for Mr. Vebbe."

Some minutes later he came back alone, and presently, following him, appeared the portly form of

Marius Vebbe. Carter brought Stanchfield to the curtain, and the three watched breathlessly. The same thought struck each of them. Vebbe had changed much in the last month. His dignified, rather crusty air of importance and reserve had given place to a furtive, sidelong glance. His cheeks had lost their sanguine health and were sunken. He stooped a little as he walked. There was something subtly repelling about the man.

He advanced into the Moorish room with shuffling step. In the center of the little apartment was a carved table bearing a lighted lamp, and the way led close beside it. His eyes came to the table and he stopped abreast of it. Stanchfield and Ralph followed the glance. Directly in the flood of light lay a book. It was closed and the place was marked with a valuable gold pencil which Nitton recognized as one he had often seen in Carter's hand. The thick end of the pencil protruded beyond the leaves several inches. It was crusted with diamonds. The flash of the jeweled top against the dark wood of the table would have drawn the attention of any casual passerby.

Marius Vebbe gazed at the pencil a moment, and as he gazed his lips parted. But no smile appeared upon his face. He looked quickly up and down the corridor. In the pendulous mouth, the staring eyes and slack cheeks the watchers read a strange purpose. Stanchfield would have started forward with a cry if Carter had not restrained him. Then one of Vebbe's hands stretched out clawlike and closed upon

the pencil. Swiftly, furtively, he thrust it into his coat and shuffled on.

Each of the three men avoided the pale face of his companion as all left their hiding place. Stanchfield swore softly to himself. Nitton stammered exclamations. It was as if they had assisted at some weird and degenerate rite, an impression that the barbaric draperies and shaded light of the room served to emphasize. Carter alone retained full control of himself.

"I think," he said gravely, "that we would better hold our interview with Mr. Vebbe in his own apartments later in the evening."

They waited in the café, and after a time they were able to talk over the situation calmly. They were agreed that instant action was necessary and that the fate of the Slate Mountain hung upon the success of their mission. Carter caused their three names to be announced at Vebbe's rooms about eleven o'clock. They entered to find him seated in a large armchair. He received them coolly and with some trace of irritation. After greeting Carter and Nitton he ignored them, addressing himself to Stanchfield.

"Sit down, won't you? Glad to see you." There was no sincerity in the tone. "I'll ring for drinks."

"Pardon me, Mr. Vebbe," said Carter, stepping naturally into the lead. "We are here merely to talk business, and we will not prolong our stay longer than is absolutely necessary."

A dull flush mounted to Vebbe's face as he turned to the Virginian. His miserable assumption of dig-

nity after what they had seen made him a ludicrous and loathsome object to his visitors. "I am not prepared to discuss business at this time," he said loftily.

"I am sorry," said Carter, "but this is of the utmost importance. We three are all stockholders in the Slate Mountain——"

"I must insist," said Vebbe angrily, with rising voice, "that I do not care to consider such matters at this time."

Carter rose, walked to the door, opened it and looked out into the hall. Closing it again he approached Vebbe and stood before him. "Mr. Vebbe," he said, "we do not mean to be harsh or unpleasant; but you must hear us. We know of your—weakness. We were in the Moorish room this evening when you passed through."

Again there came the repulsive loosening of the mouth and the stare in the eyes, the swift change they had seen there before. The man seemed to sink together in his chair. His hands fluttered on the arms. Then he peered up with a cunning flash.

"In the Moorish room? No one was in the——"

"We were behind the sun parlor curtain."

He collapsed completely. Stanchfield sprang for water, but Vebbe waved him off. Trembling, cowering, he glanced like a hunted thing from one to the other of the three. Carter hurried on to have the situation over.

"Is this the hold that Granson had over you? Did he know that you were a kleptomaniac, that you

couldn't resist the fascination of jewels?" he asked rather brutally.

Vebbe's eyes wandered stupidly from Carter's face to his shirt bosom and back again.

"Speak up, man," said the Virginian sharply. "Is that the truth?"

And Vebbe, like a man in a trance, said: "It is the truth. He discovered it one day, and he used the knowledge against me." The proud railroad president was a broken thing.

"What was the arrangement he forced you to?"

"I was to help him beat down the stock by spreading false reports and getting stockholders to sell. He was to buy all he could get. Then he was going to buy my block at a special price. That would give him control." He shivered as if taken with a chill.

"Have you handed over your stock yet?" It was the vital question, and each one there knew it."

"No," breathed Vebbe, and a long sigh came from the Virginian.

"Stanchfield has a syndicate that will take over your holdings at the price Granson was to pay you," he said. "Of course, you'll have to resign and leave the club."

Vebbe nodded, and they left him when the arrangements had been completed. The three men, shaken by the pitiful scene they had witnessed, passed down in silence to the deserted café. On the way they passed the bulletin board, and Carter called their attention to the number of "Lost" notices of jewelry

it held. "That's how I got the tip," he said. "From that and from his manner when I talked to him."

"What was it you saw through the window that night?" asked Ralph some minutes later.

"I saw Vebbe cringing in an ecstasy of terror and Granson standing over him, threatening him as he might a dog," said Carter. "I knew then that Granson must have some terrible hold upon him. It occurs to me," he added grimly, "that if I ever have the opportunity I shall take great pleasure in evening Vebbe's score with Granson." The others nodded vigorously.

"We might do something in that direction with the reorganized Slate Mountain," suggested Stanchfield.

CHAPTER XVI

A WAYSIDE ADVENTURE

A BLURRED flash of red shot against a brown cloud and a short, brass-throated shriek shattered the peaceful burr of the motors. Without conscious nervous direction Carter whirled his wheel around with a pull that partly lifted him from his seat. There was a shock, something like an all-enwrapping electric battery that seemed to touch every inch of his body—and he was floating away on the drift clouds of dreams.

It was very pleasant, there in the upper spaces, where he seemed to have lost all gross weight, a dancing, irresponsible speck in the void. When he began to feel himself drawn earthward with a returning sense of identity and pain he developed a vague resentment. And so it was that he looked out with extreme disfavor upon the world a few moments later when his eyes opened. It did not tend to improve his state of mind when he became aware that his view was somewhat imperfect owing to a rough rubber tire that pressed persistently upon the bridge of his nose.

“Hello!” he remarked suddenly.

"Well, what of it?" answered a heavy voice somewhere behind him. Carter blinked at the tire and reflected. There was certainly nothing "of it," so far as he knew. Really, the question was quite impertinent. He had framed a precise answer to that effect when the voice broke out with a very matter-of-fact groan, followed by very earthly and common profanity. Carter suddenly felt that his legs were aching dully.

When he tried to move them they seemed to have lost the habit of obedience. Under the stimulus of the rapid and expressive monologue from the strange voice he cautiously tried his arms, one after the other. He was relieved to find that they moved. The tire annoyed him, and catching at it he shifted his head to one side.

What he saw was a ground level vision of wreckage—wreckage complete, disastrous and convincing. He could identify every fragment he saw as a former part of his new yellow racer, and he remembered, finally, that something had happened. He recalled that for half an hour he had been climbing a long, gradual ascent, that at the top he had thrown on high speed and that there had been a crash. He was unable to look behind him, where the voice continued its stream of calm invective, unwavering and unchecked. Carter listened in grudging admiration.

"That's all very well," he interrupted presently, "but I should appreciate it more if you'd kindly lift the edge of the tonneau off my legs."

"I will with pleasure," came the answer, "if you'll

remove the whole blanked machine from my right shoulder."

"Our staying powers seem to be about equal," observed the Virginian, still a little light headed.

There was another period of silence. The stranger had pretermitted his lone commentary and was engaged in some kind of a scuffling struggle. Then a new voice intruded, a treble prattle, and a strange picture was presented to the prostrate and astonished Carter. A man moved into view, smeared, ragged, torn and dusty. One sleeve of a heavy automobile coat and its adjoining half of garment flagged about him grotesquely. And in his left arm he carried the daintiest, brightest and happiest of mites, a baby girl not three years old.

It was evident that the child had been in the accident, but by some miracle she had escaped without a scratch or a wrinkled ruffle. Her little black velvet coat and coquettish hood were dusty but whole, and her pretty face, framed in curly wisps, bore no traces of fear or pain. She clung confidently about the man's neck and laughed.

"Where was she?" asked Carter, smiling.

"On the grass about twenty feet away, chasing a green beetle," returned the man with a grin. Carter did not recognize him, but he was staring hard at the Virginian.

"Do I or do I not observe the battered but still heroic figure of R. Pendleton Carteret over there?" he said presently.

"The same," returned Carter, while the stranger set

the child on her feet and hauled him with some difficulty by one arm from under the wreck. "But you have the advantage of me."

"Johnson Van Ness. I've seen you at the Wampum Club. This is my daughter. We're staying at a hotel up in the hills beyond."

"Ah!" commented Carter. He did not know the name. The two men inspected each other gravely, the Virginian sitting up in the road. He found that he was not able to stand, though his legs, beyond being numb and paralyzed, appeared to have suffered no damage. Van Ness, it appeared, was in worse state with a sprained shoulder and a wrenched ankle.

With a common impulse they looked at the ruined machines. The red car had turned turtle and lay with its four smashed wheels uplifted like ludicrous, malformed limbs. The body of the yellow racer had been stripped cleanly, and the chassis was toppled on its side, balanced on its left side and wheels.

"Rather complete," said Carter.

"Not quite. To complete it two blamed fools ought to be awaiting burial instead of slow starvation. Do you know that we are up on the Blue Mountains, six miles one way from a town and two the other from my hotel? And do you know that nobody comes this way once in twenty-four hours, or ever, if it can be helped?"

Carter glanced at the little girl, who was playing with the top of a shattered brass lamp. "Then what shall we do?"

"Wait, I guess. Neither of us is good for the walk."

For answer Carter pointed to the sky. "We're in for one of those pleasant soaking autumn rains into the bargain. Nice prospect, isn't it?"

His manner was as light and casually friendly as it had been a moment before, but a new series of thoughts had started in his brain while the other was speaking. From the first the voice had faintly stirred some cord of memory, and the vague suggestions that vibrated with it through association were not pleasant. Van Ness? He was certain that no Van Ness belonged to the Wampum.

"That means camping out, I suppose," said Van Ness, with a sudden frown of anxiety and impatience. "What a confounded ass you were to be speeding at that rate toward a turn!" He lifted the knuckle of his left hand against the corner of his mouth and gnawed his lip with the peculiar habitual gesture of some who wear mustaches. Again the cord stirred, and Carter watched him keenly. The other caught his eye for a second and lowered his hand awkwardly.

"I imagine neither of us was over careful," returned the Virginian easily. "This isn't a part of the State where one would expect to meet a motorist at every corner."

The child ran to Van Ness with her shining fragment of brass. "'Oppy, 'oppy. Here's a nice 'poon." The man put her away rather roughly, but Carter caught her up and seated her on his lap. She was a friendly little soul, and the Virginian's charm was

potent with children. He took wondering interest in her "'poon" and won the tiny maid's heart on the spot.

"My like you, 'oppy," she announced, settling closer. Carter glanced up to find Van Ness frowning down at them and gnawing his lip again.

"'Oppy?" queried the Virginian.

"That's what she calls every one," said the other shortly.

"What's your name?" asked the Virginian, turning back to his conquest.

"Marg'ret," answered the child, nodding sagely.

"Margaret—what?" But she only repeated the word.

"See here," Van Ness broke in suddenly. "My shoulder is giving me all kinds of trouble. I believe a bandage would make it more comfortable. See if you can help."

He knelt in the dust, and Carter, sending the girl to play with her "'poon," tore the lining of the other's coat into strips. From these he fashioned a serviceable sling, binding and supporting the arm. He had full opportunity to note the stocky, muscular build of his companion, and somehow this, too, fitted into the dim feeling of a familiarity he bore for this man. After the rude operation was complete Van Ness caught the Virginian around the body with his sound arm and partly lifted, partly dragged him to the sloping bank at the side, where they were canopied by the thick growth of trees.

It was nearly dusk, and the stranger set about

collecting materials for a camp. From the wreck he dragged a spare coat of Carter's and the other half of his own garment. Among the trees along the road he found a quantity of dry branches. The downpour was threatening before he had finished. He called the little girl to shelter and made her comfortable while he started the fire. The rain came presently, with slanting, slashing fury and a roll of thunder, one of the rare electric storms of late fall. It left them fairly well protected. Carter found some broken bits of cigars in his pocket, and the men lay about the fire and smoked. Margaret, warm and sleepy, did not seem to be afraid of the thunder or the occasional flicker of lightning.

"How are your legs?" asked Van Ness after a time.

"Bad. I can't move them at all. I rather think the right one is fractured." He nursed them tenderly. It was a small deceit, for the numbness had been slowly passing, and although he felt sore all over he was sure that he could make shift to stand before long.

"Buck up, R. Pendleton," said Van Ness. "Society is not to lose its shapely mirror of fashion so easily. You'll keep your shape, I'll bet on that." The rough mockery of the tone and words, the bold smile and the white line of teeth set the memory cord twanging once more. The man had dropped a corner of his veil of refinement. And then, suddenly, Carter caught the note of that cord. Van Ness was the man of the rosewood cabinet, the captor of Prince Augustus,

"Mackintosh," his old enemy! Now he knew why he has missed a mustache.

He repressed the start and flash of recognition and met the sharp, smiling eyes of the other quietly, though with quickened pulse. Van Ness watched the Virginian keenly for a moment, as if waiting for some sign of aroused suspicion. Relighting his stub of cigar from a blazing twig with steady hand, Carter rearranged his covering carelessly. A whirl of possibilities raced through his mind, and he sought to arrange them.

The presence of Van Ness argued the progress of a crime. So much was fairly certain. As to what crime, Carter could only guess. He firmly believed that the little girl did not belong to the man. His manner when she began to tell her name aided that belief. The child's very willingness to make friends and call any one "'Oppy" argued it. Margaret. Margaret what? And then a tingling thrill shot through him.

The suggestion seemed incredible, mad, but it persisted. In the smoking-room of the Wampum weeks before he had heard a whispered rumor that the daughter of one of the most important and exclusive families in society's inner circle had disappeared. The matter had been hushed up by the most strenuous efforts, had never been brought to the attention of the authorities, and was being handled by an army of private detectives, according to this rumor. It had passed the way of such reports without attracting notice.

But Carter remembered now another fact among the thousand trifles that it was his business to store away. He recalled that the practical withdrawal of the Mandewells from participation in social affairs had occasioned much comment of late. The unwonted phenomenon had knocked at his curiosity, and it had been strongly impressed upon him that George Mandewell, and, indeed, all the family, rested under some sinister shadow. He brought before his mental vision Mandewell's face as he had last seen it—drawn, haggard, sharply marked with the stamp of agony and suspense. And Mandewell, as he knew, had a daughter Margaret, about three years old.

He yawned, disposed his legs comfortably and stretched out under his coat. Van Ness, apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, followed the example. The rain roared and guttered about them. Chill rivulets wandered down their sheltered slope. The close-grown spruces, once saturated, proved a leaky thatch. Pale flashes across the sky from time to time made the ensuing darkness almost tangible. The child had fallen asleep.

"It'll be worse if we let the fire go out," said Van Ness. "Get some rest while you can. I'll stand first watch." Carter nodded, pillow'd his head on his arm and gradually sank into heavy breathing.

Van Ness, crouched at the opposite side of the fire, fed branches to the upleaping flame that snapped and hissed above the grumble of the storm. Often he glanced at the two sleepers. Once he felt solicitously

of his bandaged arm. Then he dragged himself against a tree and fell into a doze.

It was past midnight when he raised himself. Carter had not moved. Van Ness, with eyes alert, crawled slowly backward out of the circle of light into the black, dripping curtain beyond, still rent occasionally by a glimmer in the sky. Carter twisted in his sleep, but his eyes did not open. In the intervals of the gusts and the thunder a hollow, muffled clank of metal came from beyond, as if the little men of the mountain were at their anvils.

The night gave up the figure of Van Ness again about two hours later. He was drenched and shivering, and his face, washed of its stains, showed a white that the yellow firelight could not warm or quicken. The bandage was loose and displaced. As he came forward he thrust something that glittered into his hip pocket with an awkward left hand. He limped close and stood over Carter. The Virginian's breathing, deep and even, did not check or falter. Van Ness did not arouse him, but heaped the fire high and lay down quietly in his fur coat.

The first dull gray of morning had appeared along the strip of sky above the lowlands when Carter stirred. The thunder had receded, but still growled at times. He sat up cautiously and threw his covering aside, watching the recumbent form of his companion. In the road he could make out the ragged outline of the wreck. On the side toward him lay the bulk of the overturned red car. It almost concealed the chassis of his own racer. He got to his

knees and then, with stiff movements, to his feet. Halting, racked with pain at every step, he descended the bank, using a stout branch as a cane.

Passing the red car, he examined the remains of his machine closely. He assured himself, first of all, that the tires had survived without injury. The front wheel, resting on its side against the ground, was slightly buckled under. The hood was gone and the engines were a pile of jumbled scraps. From here back to the tail-light the chassis had been swept clean of its body and superstructure. It was a hopeless spectacle.

Carter climbed around inside the heap. He found the crumpled bar that had once been the steering post still in place. Nothing was left of the steering wheel but two bent stubs. The gear rod and emergency brake handles were snapped short. Turning his attention to the set of the wreck itself, he gained confirmation of something he had not quite dared to expect, though he had half guessed it. Standing on its left side, the machine's balance was not stable. The dip of the road toward the ditch threw much of the weight outward.

With another glance at Van Ness he crawled under the chassis, braced himself and waited. A wan flicker of lightning shot the gray of morning with sickly green for an instant, and when the first rumbling crash echoed through the hills he flung his strength forward. The machine gave, tottered and came down heavily, the live tires of the right side wheels taking the shock. The crippled racer was on

its feet once more. He tried the buckled left wheel and made certain that it would revolve. Then he found the extra tire in the ditch and unlaced the cord that bound the canvas cloth together. Concealing this, he returned to his coat and resumed his doze.

The first rays of rising sun were sparkling along the road when the two men sat up to face their situation again. The child was still sleeping. The passing of the storm had left a cold, clear sky. Van Ness yawned and stretched.

"Well, what for breakfast, R. Pendleton?" he asked cheerfully. "I confess to feeling hungry."

"We might find some beechnuts or chestnuts or something in the woods," returned Carter dubiously. "I'm not very strong on that sort of thing."

"Let's forage," suggested Van Ness, standing up. "How are your legs now?"

"No better."

"Never mind. It can't be long now before some one happens along. Meanwhile, to bear out this up-to-date Robinson Crusoe stunt, I'll do some exploring. Keep the fire going. Who knows but what I'll come across a haunch of venison hung up by some merry fellows of the greenwood fraternity."

He marched off parallel with the road among the trees. Carter wondered at his high spirits. He seemed to have regained full confidence, and with it his polished side had come uppermost. Apparently he had no hesitation in leaving Carter at liberty to question the child. Quite as apparently he had no fear of the result when the some one he talked of

should happen along. It was clear that he believed he had control of the situation. And Carter suspected that the reason lay in the glittering object he had brought from the wreck during the night. For the Virginian had witnessed his departure and his return. Probably his plan was to commandeer the vehicle of the first passerby.

But it was time for action. When Van Ness had passed from sight Carter hurried out to his machine again. A troublesome part of his work was clearing the débris that strewed the road behind the racer, but it was accomplished finally, and he put his shoulder to the crumpled front. Slowly the ruin yielded, moving backward an inch or two. He rested a moment, then lurched at it again, struggling for a start. Once more it backed away, and he did not pause until he had pushed it clear.

The jammed and twisted remains of the steering apparatus would allow but little motion either way, and he did better in making his turn by wrenching the forward running gear about. The maneuver took some time, since it was necessary to push and back repeatedly. At length he had the machine around. Ahead of him, over the way he had come, lay the short level stretch on which he had worked up speed the day before.

“ ‘Oppy, take me.”

The child had crawled from her warm nest and now stood with outstretched arms. He hastened to her with an anxious glance up the road. “My like you, ‘Oppy,” she assured him again, as he picked her

up. "My hung'y girl," she went on, smiling bravely, but with the quiver of a little lip.

"I know you're hungry, dear," he said gently. "But we'll have nice breakfast pretty soon. Now won't you tell me your name? Margaret—what? Margaret Mandewell?"

"Yeth. Marg'ret Man'lel," she answered decidedly.

He carried her to his shorn racer and made another nest for her on the splintered platform, comforting her as best he could. Suddenly there came a shout from up the mountain-side, followed by the sounds of a body crashing down among the bushes. With his bit of cord the Virginian swiftly lashed a short, stout branch across the broken stubs of the steering wheel. Then, pushing at the rear, he strove for headway. It was a breathless moment. He could hear Van Ness approaching. The strange vehicle was desperately heavy and slow. With straining muscles he toiled. Inch by inch he urged his travesty of a machine along the stretch of road. Twice he had to pause to correct the direction.

At the end of the short level stretch before him the long six-mile descent began with a gentle incline. He had reached the break of this first dip when Van Ness jumped into the road at the scene of the wreck with a startled cry. Carter, using every fraction of a second and every ounce of power, threw himself against the rear for a few steps, then sprang on and scrambled to the makeshift steering bar. The slope was sufficient now to hold the slow advance, and by tug-

ging at his handle he could correct the course. His improvised coaster was under way.

Standing and looking back over his shoulder he saw Van Ness pounding along in pursuit with uneven gait. The man's face was flushed and distorted with rage. The Virginian knew that if the other held to his purpose he would catch the machine before the sharper incline was reached. He prepared for handgrips, for in this decisive moment cold calculation as well as human impulse told him that the prize was worth the game. Margaret was playing with her "'poon" again, happy in the motion of the machine.

Suddenly the pursuer, hampered by the pain of his shoulder and ankle or finding another way more congenial to his temper, stopped short and dropped to one knee in the mud, not seventy feet away. The sun flashed keenly on steel. Carter caught up the child and bundled her in front of him where he could protect her. Van Ness was fumbling at his weapon with his left hand while he held it in his limp right.

The last hundred yards of the first incline were covered by the lumbering, hamstrung car at a gradually increasing pace, but it seemed to Carter as if a tugging dead weight was holding him back. Van Ness was still busy with his cartridges, without word or glance for the fugitives, intent solely upon filling the magazine.

The machine seemed to pause at the top of the steeper slope that dipped away to a turn below. In that instant Carter sank to the flooring, crouching

over the little girl and holding up a hand in impotent, horrified signal to Van Ness. He had not thought that the man really meant to fire, but the criminal was aiming steadily. The crack of the revolver rang sharply and there was a dull spat against the shattered base of the tonneau. Carter understood now. Van Ness was taking his chances of injuring the girl and counting upon either hitting Carter or forcing him, through fear for Margaret, to steer aside into the bank. It meant another decision, but Carter did not falter. He held on grimly.

Another bullet whistled close above the Virginian. He could feel the pull of the dip, and he clutched the steering handle tighter. The child, frightened and uncomfortable, began to cry. Again and again the revolver rang out, one of the missiles clipping a hole in a battered mudguard. Then, furiously aware that his quarry was escaping and that he had made a tactical error, Van Ness stopped firing and, holding his last two shots, started on a run.

But the disabled car, like a staggering thoroughbred set to the track for one more race, was gathering speed. Bumping and hammering, with a rough halt in every revolution of her wheels, she crept off down the hill. Within twenty feet Van Ness had ceased to gain, within the next twenty he was falling behind. Carter heard a last shout and two rapid reports. A moment later he was negotiating the last turn—and safety.

It was a wild ride. The road ran over levels,

slight rises and long descents with many a curve and twist. Always the jolting, protesting car increased its pace, and Carter, clinging to the rough guiding handle, swung precariously along the changing course, dodging disaster at every corner. The voice of the tortured, wrecked machine was a gibbering scream before it had covered a mile. There was a warning note in it, and Carter, confronted with this new danger, placed his heel on the broken stub of the emergency brake and thrust it forward. He feared the result, but the connecting rod was intact and the band bit gratefully, slackening the rush. He had time then to turn his attention to Margaret and soon had her smiling.

On the last gentle stretch into the little lowland town from which he had driven the preceding afternoon the Virginian was conscious that the shock, the strain and the lack of food and sleep had found him out. There was a roaring in his ears, and his hands had become nerveless. The road ahead was a blurr. He leaned forward, weak and drowsy, while the racer ran limping on.

Sharply a little cloud of figures broke from the bushes and formed in a line in front of him. Leveled rifles and a harsh command ordered him to stop. He recognized in the speaker a Pinkerton man frequently employed in difficult cases by the wealthy. Back of the detective he saw a drawn, haggard face, that of George Mandewell. He laughed hysterically, waved his hand—and fell fainting across the crazy

structure of his machine. The last thing he remembered as he floated away on the drift clouds once more was the shrill, laughing cry, with a note in it he had not heard before:

“ ‘Oppy, ‘oppy! Take me, ‘oppy!”

CHAPTER XVII

A COUNT OR TWO

WHEN Carter saw him first he was executing a kind of elaborated breakdown about a lilac bush, with sundry wavings of the arms and incoherent murmurings. Carter watched him without approval. Apparently the exhibition was connected in some way with the celebration of obscure religious rites, and the Virginian was chary of interfering. It was none of his business if a strange gentleman chose an open portion of the Sluyt Long Island estate for the exercise of dervish dancing.

But the matter that held him was that the man was young—young and handsome and well dressed, and, except as to his actions, conventionally sane in appearance. His neat checked riding suit sat well to his trim, tall figure. His breeches were impeccable. He had the lithe, weedy build of the horseman breed. For the rest he was fair and blond, and an upturned little yellow mustache gave him a rather distinguished air, or would have if he had stood still long enough. Having observed these facts with discerning eye, Carter decided to continue at the performance.

But the ceremony did not try his patience, for it

soon came to an abrupt close. The dancing gentleman, with a final stamp or two, came to a dramatic halt, folded his arms with unnecessary violence, and remained motionless and erect, glaring at the Sluyt mansion, which raised its white stone terraces and gables and turrets some quarter of a mile away. This maneuver brought his gaze almost in line with Carter, whom presently he perceived. He broke his pose long enough to raise his riding cap perfunctorily but with perfect courtesy.

"Good-morning."

There was enough of a foreign flavor in the gesture and the voice to confirm Carter in the impression that the dancing gentleman was no native eccentric. The Virginian returned the salutation gravely.

"I trust I am not interrupting you," he said.

The other turned a very frank and clear-eyed smile upon him. Evidently his ecstasy or his fanatical elevation, or whatever it was, had deserted him.

"Not at all. In fact, I was rather wishing that there was good company in the vicinity." He appeared to be quite unconscious that there was anything unusual in his recent display.

"Thanks," said Carter guardedly. "Are you staying with the Sluyts?"

"The Sluyts? Ah, no, for example," returned the other with a start and a grimace. For a moment the Virginian feared a relapse, but the smile broke through again. "And you?"

"Moi, non plus," said Carter at a venture. "I was riding along the road when I noticed you here. I

thought it might be Herbert Classan. So I walked over."

The dancing gentleman produced a little curved gold case and presented a small card without affectation. The Virginian, who was nothing if not adaptable, responded with a like formality. This is what he read on the stranger's card:

LOUIS FERNAND SAGRELLE DE PARADEUX
Comte de Garenne et de Thibault.

Having proceeded so far according to formula the two men spoiled the scene by exchanging an ordinary, plebeian handshake, quite lacking in unnatural angles. Carter found that he liked the chap immensely, apart from the fact of his title. Not that Carter had any objection to titles, but that he found the bearer of this one simple and straightforward. Meanwhile it contributed somewhat to his friendliness to know that the title was genuine. He had heard vaguely of De Garenne, though he could not exactly recall the connection.

"I also have left my mount on the highway," said his new acquaintance. "Are you on a particular mission?"

"No, just riding. I'm staying with the Champneys, below here a bit."

"Ah, and I with the Mandewells. Shall we go on, then, together?"

"If you are quite—er—through," said Carter a trifle maliciously, glancing at the lilac bush. De Garenne laughed a sound, healthy, full-toned laugh.

"You should not hold my peculiarities against me. Come. We shall tear the cobwebs loose with a gallop—yes?"

They tore several cobwebs and a fair number of miles loose during the afternoon. The Virginian, fully aware that it was very much to his advantage to cultivate the Count de Garenne, discovered that the operation meant none of the difficulties, the tortured repartees, the labored approaches which he was accustomed to negotiate at times.

In a wide detour over roads and open country they improved their acquaintance rapidly. Carter found that the strange spectacle by the lilac bush had taken on, in retrospect, the semblance of a dream. The Count de Garenne was eminently sane, clear-minded and normal. Gradually a considerable curiosity gained him, and he held a question ready until he felt that their relations had become friendly enough to warrant its intrusion.

"By the way, De Garenne," he said when he found his opening, "do you mind telling me what you were doing when I met you, unless it's some dread and sacred secret?"

They had progressed almost in a circle and were approaching the Sluyt mansion again. While Carter was speaking they had rounded a turn that brought them within view of it once more. De Garenne frowned a little, but there was nothing morbid in his expression.

"Why, if you care to know," he began, and broke again into a smile. "It is in the race. You, most

possibly, would swear and double the fist. I go through a motion here and another there. It is the impulse of my sentiment. You see, friend Carteret, I, standing there by the lilac bush, had a disappointment, or, rather, I might say, a severe shock."

"Ah!" said Carter gravely. "I think I should interrupt you to say that I seek no confidence. After all, you know, we are hardly what you would call bosom friends."

"What then?" returned the Count with a shrug. "It is nothing but what is open to all if they care to know. I merely speak in reply to your natural question. I suppose you have heard at some time that I was once engaged to Miss Sluyt?"

Carter remembered now that this was what he had tried to remember concerning De Garenne. During the preceding spring there had been formal announcement of a match between Sylvia Sluyt and the Count at Nice. About a month later it had been as formally canceled. The affair had occasioned the usual comment, but interested circles in New York had been deprived of adequate material for gossip. The only comments he had heard were from Classan, and they had been bitter. But Classan was naturally prejudiced and jealous.

"Believe me when I say," continued De Garenne, with some heat, "that it was no seeking of mine that I found myself near this house. I did not even know that she lived here. I was attracted by a late-flowering plant, and since there was no hedge or

other barrier at this point I dismounted and walked over to inspect it.

“Then, while I was standing at the spot, I looked over,” his sweeping arm energetically indicated the lofty porte-cochère of the mansion. “Well. Perhaps you did not observe. I saw Miss Sluyt. She was mounting to her saddle, and a cavalier was assisting her. As you will readily agree, friend Carteret, there are ways and ways of offering such assistance. I would not have spied, you understand, but I had an excellent view of the manner in which this cavalier rendered his *devoir*.”

Carter was sure that if they had been on foot at that moment the Count would have resumed his intricate breakdown. As it was, he grimaced violently. The Virginian smiled sympathetically.

“I see,” he said. “Sylvia must have been starting out with Herbert Classan.”

Remembering Classan’s temper, his fists and his prejudices, he thought it most fortunate for the Count that he had confined his emotions to waltzing around the lilac bush.

The Count shrugged again. “It is a matter of indifference to me what his name may be. But this was where I saw for the first time. And it was hard, you know, friend Carteret. Um-m! Well, I was very near to a scene, you understand.” At this juncture he raised his riding whip and cut the air viciously. His mount shied and supplied the dancing steps he obviously required.

"I suppose you know that Sylvia is engaged to Classan?" suggested Carter.

"I know it now," cried the Count, encouraging rather than suppressing the antics of his steed. "I tell you I saw—something that was like a thousand stings upon my brain. Ah-h! I was very near——"

"Hold on, there, old man!" called Carter warningly. "No need for dramatics after this interval."

The Count reined in his horse and rode soberly, his excitement fading to the open smile again. "You are right, of course. Still I shall—perhaps—at some later time——"

There was nothing vicious about his half-expressed thought, but to the Virginian it held considerable significance. He was quite convinced that the Count was capable of making a scene, honest and sincere enough, but uncomfortable for the others concerned and probably quite painful for himself. He saw that the Count, once face to face with Classan, his successor, would precipitate trouble. Meanwhile, as the other seemed willing, he sought further information.

"The termination of your engagement was—ah—very sudden, was it not?"

But De Garenne had apparently reached the end of his confiding mood. He nodded and answered shortly, if inoffensively. They paced on soberly in silence, while the Virginian adjusted himself to the change. If the Count could so easily share his intimate affairs on short acquaintance it was not to be wondered at if he as suddenly and unaccountably withdrew. Carter was not conscious of any diminution of regard for his

new confidant, however. He decided that he had brought it upon himself by too rudely checking the other's extravagance.

They had reached the further end of the level stretch of road which lay in front of the Sluyt place and were making a turn lined with elms that would take them out of sight of it. At that instant De Garenne turned in his saddle and looked back at the building. Carter, with eyes ahead, saw two figures riding toward them at a brisk trot. They were Herbert Classan and Sylvia Sluyt.

The whole situation flashed on Carter in a breath. The two parties must meet. He had had a glimpse of the purpose and nature of the Frenchman. Classan he knew even better. Herbert was a giant, heavy-handed, hard-muscled and not too tactful. Like many slow-witted men, he was quick to anger. Carter had seen him once or twice in wrath, as on the occasion in the Greenbough Country Club when he had cracked a German army officer's skull with a billiard cue for being too clever at keeping his string. Carter could use a Count in his business, but not a Count with a broken head.

A breath—and he raised his riding whip for a slash.

The approaching couple looked up at the rattle and plunge of hoofs to see a man charging toward them through a cloud of dust. He was plainly a wretched rider and appeared to be in imminent danger. He had lost one stirrup. With hands clutching the animal's mane he held his seat awry. He came

within an inch of being thrown before he reached them. They separated quickly to let the whirlwind pass, and Classan, wheeling deftly, clattered off in pursuit with a parting shout to the girl.

The thing had happened with startling suddenness, and she stood staring over her shoulder after the galloping pair with her lips still formed on the phrase of quiet conversation that had occupied her but a second before. Then she caught the sound of hoofs again. She turned to the front. And there, with his horse thrown back gracefully, bowing low in his saddle, a gallant and handsome figure, was Louis Fernand Sagrelle de Paradeux, Count de Garenne et de Thibault.

Carter had time to congratulate himself upon having taken out one of the best mounts in the Champney stables while he was hurling the animal at full tilt down the road. Classan, he knew, was riding his famous black hunter, Rosemary, and the chase would have been all too short had the fugitive been any but Champney's Thorneycroft. As it was, the wily Virginian held his lead to a point far down the road where the road swept about a corner. Then, a safe half mile from Sylvia and the Count, he slackened the pace somewhat and regained partial control, while Classan drew in upon him.

The pursuer had recognized the apparently helpless rider during the last hundred yards, and showed a very red and very angry face as he came within hailing distance.

“Perhaps you think that's a sporting trick, Car-

teret," he yelled. "Perhaps you expected to have all kinds of a laugh on the chap who went out of his way to help you. I've a mind to bash your wretched head."

Carter in simple fact had not regarded the situation in this aspect. He required no diagram to see instantly that he had thrust himself into a difficult corner with the violent Classan. Meanwhile he continued to sprawl in a picturesque attitude upon his mount, turning an occasional agonized glance behind him, as if bewildered with terror.

"Aw, can it!" roared Classan delicately. "A lively chance you've got to make me believe he bolted with you. Just wait." He spurred on Rosemary to close the gap, evidently with intent of bodily assault. But Carter's plans did not contemplate a personal combat with the savage, rough-fisted young horseman. He checked his pace further, though evidently with great difficulty, and bawled his answer unsteadily, reeling from side to side:

"Hey, Classan! Whaz a matter? Say, help a chap—can't you?"

The pursuer, thundering down with furious expression and whip actually raised for a blow, dropped his arm and caught Thorneycroft's bridle. A look of abject and ludicrous amazement spread upon his heavy face.

"By the jumping Lord Harry!" he gasped. "Drunk as a fiddler. You chicken-brained idiot! Here, get off that horse before you break your confounded neck!"

"Classan, Class-an," stuttered Carter, rolling his eyes. "Thought I was a goner, sure."

"Get off," snarled Classan, who had gradually brought the hunter to a halt. The Virginian shook his head solemnly and lurched to a dangerous angle as he strove unsuccessfully to regain his off stirrup. "Can't—can't be done, Classan. 'S—'s not mine, really."

Classan called him an evil name and glared back along the road. Sylvia, apparently, had not followed them, but had gone on home. He shrugged resignedly.

"Well, what I ought to do is to throw you off and leave you in a hedge to sober up," he growled. "But I suppose I'll have to walk the floor with you. Heave ahead."

To the Virginian's immense relief his companion chose to "walk the floor" further along the road instead of turning back, and his problem was simplified. It consisted now in keeping up the impersonation, and in this he felt perfectly safe. He took the natural mummer's delight in the game, and for the next hour Herbert Classan, wrathful, scornful and amused by turns, viewed as convincing an example of bibulous hilarity as Jan Steen himself could have wished. Carter was satisfied. He had saved his Count and earned Sylvia's gratitude for preventing a scene.

Late wanderers from a peaceful Long Island hamlet that afternoon reached their destinations with a tale of two horsemen, locked in brotherly embrace,



MODEST STEIN

ONE WAS RAISING A TUNEFUL VOICE IN RIBALD SONG, WHILE
THE OTHER ALTERNATELY SWORE AND HELD HIS SULLEN
PEACE.

—Page 273.

who paced the winding road toward the setting sun. One was raising a tuneful voice in ribald song, while the other, holding the singer upright in his saddle, alternately swore and held his sullen peace.

As these horsemen, both undeniably sober, cantered down toward the Champney residence in the cool of the evening two other riders, a man and a woman, were parting on the drive of the Sluyt mansion some miles to the east. No roaming rustic had passed along that road since the time of the runaway, and in consequence there was no one to record that the second couple had taken exactly two hours and a half to cover the short strip between the elm-lined turn and the house.

Carter salved his conscience with regard to the trick played upon Classan by having him around to the Brockston Country Club for an excellent dinner, an attention that completely won the beefy young man. Before they entered the dining-room Classan telephoned to the Sluyt home and talked with Sylvia. He came out of the booth grinning.

"She gave me Ned for not coming straight back," he announced to the interested Virginian, "but I squared myself by telling her I had to chase you into the next county."

"Ah! Did she return home?"

"Sure. Went right on."

"All alone?" inquired Carter innocently.

"Of course," returned the other.

"Ah!" said Carter.

"I tell you, she's a mighty fine girl," said Classan, rubbing his hands with sudden effusiveness.

"Very. You're to be congratulated," said Carter absently.

They sat through the meal in perfect amity and the Virginian submitted to Classan's fussy dictation in the matter of drinks without a murmur. Classan discovered that his companion was really a decent chap when not intoxicated. He meditated a particular favor.

"I say, Carteret," he said, "I think I'll ride over and see her again to-night. Will you come?"

And Carter, who had grown exceedingly curious, assented. The Count would surely be at a safe distance by now.

They galloped off together through the starlit countryside in good time for a short visit at the Sluyts', retracing part of their meandering path of the afternoon. Classan congratulated the other gruffly upon his quick recovery from a bad case, and the Virginian replied that that was one of his best points. Such was the extent of their conversation up to the time they reached the railroad crossing. To the left branched the road leading to the station a short distance away. The crossing was dimly lighted from four lamp-posts.

As they started across the tracks two gleaming eyes shot around a curve in the road ahead and their horses pranced nervously. An automobile came snuffling at reduced speed toward them and bumped slowly over the rails. The riders drew a little to one side, holding in their mounts to let it pass.

"Say," Classan exclaimed suddenly, "that's one of the Sluyts' cars. Maybe Sylvia's there."

They pressed their horses nearer. Three figures were in the machine, one at the wheel and two in the tonneau. As the car came abreast of them they leaned forward and peered through the vague obscurity. In the faint glow from the crossing lamps they caught a brief vision. One of those in the tonneau was a man. The other was a girl. The man they could not see clearly, though Carter conceived instant suspicions as to his identity. But the girl was unmistakably Sylvia Sluyt.

"Hello!" bellowed Classan. "Sylvia! Hold on a moment!"

There was no possibility that she had not heard. But the automobile had passed them. It turned to the left with a crescendo grind of speed. "Well, I'm damned!" growled Classan, wheeling his horse. "What the devil does that mean? I'm going to have a look."

Pique and sharp jealousy spoke in his voice, and Carter remembered once more that he could use a whole Count, but not a part of one. He whirled as quickly as his companion and bore in closely at his right side. They were in the center of the crossing. Before the other could get his horse in hand, the Virginian pressed his right heel into the flank of his own mount. The nervous animal swung his quarters into the ribs of Classan's horse. At the shock Classan's horse shied violently, tumbling off the tracks into the ditch, which was strewn with loose stones.

There the animal floundered an instant and went down with a crash. It was up almost at once, Classan standing at its head. He had not seen the rapid trick.

"Here's a mess!" he roared.

"What's wrong?" asked Carter.

"Slipped a stifle!" howled Classan. He led his useless, hobbling steed clear of the ditch and glared down the road at the departing bulk of the automobile. "By Heaven! I don't like it. I'm going to follow, anyway." And he broke into a lumbering run.

Carter, with one more reflection anent the possible value of a real, live Count, urged his mount into a gallop, and pelted on ahead after the automobile. It was his purpose to smuggle De Garenne out of danger if he had been right in his suspicion. As he approached the station the evening train to the city pulled in. The automobile, its tonneau empty, was leaving the steps as he dashed up.

Carter flung himself from the saddle, threw his bridle reins over the hitching rail and rushed through the station. Two figures were entering the first car of the train and turned at his shout. They were Sylvia Sluyt and the Count de Garenne. The Count was carrying a suit case.

"Oh, Miss Sluyt," called Carter anxiously as he hurried up, "Mr. Classan will be here in a moment."

"That is interesting, but not important," said De Garenne, taking the answer upon him. They were both smiling. The Virginian stared.

"If he does not hurry we shall not wait for him. We are going to Jersey City," said the Count.

"Jersey City?" gasped Carter.

"Yes. To be married. Will you wish us good fortune, friend Carteret? Believe me, I shall never, never forget what you have done for us."

He was shaking hands with them again, when the conductor gave warning and swung on the step, and the train jarred into motion. A moment later he turned, still bewildered, from staring after the vanishing red lights to blunder into the breathless Classan.

"Where—where is she?" demanded the newcomer.

Carter placed both hands upon his shoulders and, facing him about, marched him through the station to the road. "Come on, my son," he said. "We both need a drink, and a real one this time."

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLOSED DOOR

THE slamming of the outer door to his apartments sent a tiny shock through Carter, and he frowned unpleasantly. He had been aware of late that trifles played upon his nerves like the jagged edge of a clumsy weapon. He promised himself an interview with Hopkins that should impress that obsequious functionary into cat-like regard for the quiet now so essential to his master.

As he sat forward in his chair Hopkins drew back the hall curtains, but the outburst that the Virginian had prepared did not come. Hopkins, standing in respectful attitude, his silver card salver poised at the proper angle, was suddenly thrust aside without ceremony, and a smiling, debonair little figure swaggered past him into the room.

"Thousand pardons, Carteret, my good chap, but I never wait upon ceremony when calling upon a friend, y' know."

Carter did not appear to be overwhelmed with enthusiasm at the implied honor. He rose, however, waved Hopkins away, and shook hands with a gesture

that, while not perfunctory, was far from indicating any warm regard for his visitor.

"How are you, Detray? What on earth brought you here?"

The other laughed. "First of all, I'm dry. Anything interesting in that cabinet over there? If so, why not?" He had actually started to open the liquor closet himself. Carter, restraining his exasperation with considerable difficulty, hastened to forestall him, and his visitor subsided with a brandy and soda and his brazen smile into the corner of a divan.

The Virginian, conscious that he could not bring to the contest the strength and force that had once been his and that the last few months had sapped from him, prepared to meet the ordeal under a reserve of dogged impassiveness. It was his best defense and now his only one.

"Looking rather seedy, old chap," giggled Detray. "Find the going pretty rough?"

"I'm quite well, thanks," answered Carter restrainedly.

Detray laughed, a queer little laugh with a jig-saw note, apparently inspired thereto by Carter's hollow tone. "Well, it's good to hear you say so."

Carter could see no end to this badinage, and with a total absence of the finesse upon which he had prided himself tried to hurry the game. "What is it, Reggie?" he asked defiantly. "What's the use of stalling around? You haven't come here to condole

with me about a mortified toe or the state of my health. Now, fire ahead."

Detray became suddenly very solemn, innocently solemn, like a youthful owl. "As a matter of fact, I did have a purpose, Carteret. I often think this is a rotten world we live in, absolutely not worth the time we give it. But in spite of the truism that a decent action is altogether unfashionable, I invariably make it a custom to break the rule whenever I have the chance."

"Well?" said Carter.

"It won't do, Carteret," went on Detray smoothly. "You're not careful enough. Understand once more that I speak in friendship. Surely my presence here is proof of it. But you must be more careful if you expect to be recognized again by any one worth while. That's flat."

"Come again, Reggie; you're talking parables." Carter's words were easy, but they caught in his throat.

"Why sidestep? It's Mrs. Osterman," said Detray.

"Well?" he said again hoarsely.

"It is perfectly well known that you were infatuated with her before her marriage," resumed Detray, sensing and, as it were, sipping the Virginian's distress. "These things get about. Lord can tell how! It is even public property that you helped her out of a very delicate situation by suppressing certain blackmailers. For a time, of course, the marriage stopped gossip. But now——" He shrugged.

Something in Carter lashed him to speech. "What now?" he said, grasping the arms of his chair.

"Why, my dear fellow, you know better than I possibly can. Folks say that you have seen her every day for a month. Osterman, meanwhile, has been at Hot Springs with a corps of physicians. You have accompanied her continually to places where people go, at unseasonable hours. You have been handling vast investments for her while——" He checked Carter's violent gesture with a wave. "You should not be surprised. These things would not be known if you had not been indiscreet. And as a man of the world, you know what goes about when a man attends to a woman's money for her. That means but one thing."

It was the hot iron against the hurt of the wounded wolf that hurled the Virginian across the intervening space to the divan. Raging, white, in raw revolt against this smiling, soft-voiced demon, he leaped with grasping hands. He caught Detray about the neck and sprang upon him, crushing his body under one knee with a wild, primitive joy in the feel of a prey. Social ambition, all that had seemed sweetest to him through the years of struggle, seemed as naught now, though perhaps the conviction that he had lost his conquest served to spur his fury. But chiefly his mind ached under the blow that Detray had dealt him, as a man, and mostly he hungered for revenge upon this evil bit of flesh. His clutch tightened.

Detray lay and smiled up at him. The fire had

flared into a blaze behind the dull smoke of his eyes. Weak, helpless, with never a move to escape the hold of the stronger man, he showed no sign of fear, made no sign of resistance or appeal. Several times his lips parted as he essayed to speak, patiently, as one might strive against a temporary impediment. Carter looked down at that pink face, fascinated; saw it change to white and from white to blue without relaxing the band of muscle. The eyes, smoldering into his, grew dim. The mass beneath his knee became flaccid, yielding. Then the eyelids fell.

With a terrible cry Carter released his hands and staggered back, staring at the silent, limp figure huddled up on the divan. Hopkins, trembling, horrified by the strange summons and the stranger sight that met his eyes, shuffled in and stood helplessly.

“The brandy!” gasped Carter. “Quick!”

With hurried, awkward movements, interfering and stumbling in their haste, they applied the restorative. For a breathless minute they watched. Then, slowly, a faint flush came back to the pallid cheek and Carter breathed a laden sigh of abject thankfulness. He waved Hopkins from the room and fell, fainting, into his chair.

They sat some time later and looked at each other, Carter with the expression of a condemned criminal, Detray without emotion of any kind. The silence lasted long, until the Virginian reached out a faltering arm and strove for a word, however pitiful and inadequate, to break the unbearable situation. Then

the extraordinary little man spoke, and Carter shivered at the tone.

"As I was about to observe," he said, "that is the last thing, the thing that one cannot do." He paused, but the Virginian made no move. Resolution, courage, determination were qualities that he could well understand, for he was no stranger to them. But this was something that he could not even put a name to. He listened as passively as if the other had been reciting a prayer for the dead.

"You see how it is," went on Detray, loosening his wet collar with languid gesture. "There are many sins—to return to our flattest of platitudes—but there is only one unforgivable sin. And that is to be caught with the goods. Of course, in your private account with the recording angel you may well be quite guiltless. That does not alter the matter a jot. The vital point is whether folks are convinced thus and so in regard to your actions. If they are, you are done, unless you happen to be born among the demigods, and you, R. Pendleton, were not. Is that clear?"

"You are essentially a vulgarian, Carteret," he purred. "It is a waste of time to sharpen epigrams upon your epidermis. Still, it was my pleasure and is to let you know where you stand."

Carter did not answer, and Detray stood looking at him a moment. Then the little man showed the strangest glimpse of his strange personality—a side, perhaps, that no one else had ever seen in him. He stepped forward quickly, holding out his hand and

smiling his same brazen smile. "But, if you don't mind, I'd like to thank you for a new sensation. With your aid I discovered a new savor of living when I almost ceased to live." Carter, uncomprehending, returned his clasp. When he glanced up from the daze into which he had fallen some minutes later Detray was gone.

In the bitter hour of reflection that came to him then he saw himself stripped of the plates of mail with which he had buckled himself during his long, wearng fight.

He bore scars upon him, too, and these he marked — the old ones that had healed, and the newer ones, still sharp and gaping, that had fallen upon him during his last month of breathless, wearng combat. For he had fought, fought hard to hold what he had gained, fought against the leaping traitorous revolt in his own breast and the call of a woman. He had fought, and he had won. And to what purpose? Only to learn that victory was denied him, that he had been condemned and banished by judges who saw but the thick dust of conflict hanging about him and said that he had lost. And this was the end of his ambition!

But there was a cooling draught ready to his lips. If he left this land under sentence he need not go alone or uncomforted. There was still one prize, one compensation that he could carry back with him to the lower levels, the outer darkness. He had handled her investments, Detray had said. Yes, that was true. And he had done well, with the shrewd knowledge he

had gained in his campaign. He had piled gold upon her gold, and she was wealthy in her own right. He had never permitted himself to read the full message in her eyes when he brought her more and still more. But now he remembered it and read it. He and she should take it for their journey back.

He was standing in the dark room looking out into the lamplit canyon of the street when the sudden slamming of his outer door set every nerve in him to jangling. With a furious protest on his lips he strode to the switch and snapped it, waiting for the appearance of the obsequious Hopkins. He saw the man's hand draw back the curtain, caught a passing glimpse of his lowered head, and she stepped into the full flood of the light.

The years of marriage had wrought small change in Marion Keith, now Mrs. Osterman. Slim, girlish, her clear, gray eyes had lost none of their clearness, the curve of her fair face none of its purity.

"I thought it was time to come," she said simply.

"Does it help matters to say that?" he asked, just as he would have asked months ago when the first blow of the fray had fallen from his raised arm.

"Robert, this is the end," she answered firmly. "It is because I have never taken the initiative that you must bear with me now. Why should we be ordinary? Why should you and I talk like visored folk that are ashamed to show or to look upon the face of truth?"

"Some there be that look upon it and die," he said with a slow smile.

"And some that must look upon it to live," she returned quickly. "I have always known, as you must have known, that this could not go on forever. I brought it all clear before myself to-day. And if I needed an emphasis of the result I received word to rejoin—Mr.—Osterman to-morrow. I shall not go to him. I shall never pass another day under the same roof with him. I cannot. It is all very plain."

A whim, a fancy, a shred of the torn banner under which he had withstood all assaults from her and from her ally in his breast these last months summoned his weapon to a parry once more. He laughed a little wearily.

"We have all the elements here, Marion. Lovers parted by unnecessary obstacle of a husband. She comes to his rooms alone, at night. Passion ripped to tatters. We lack nothing but the slow music. You spoke of common folk a moment ago. Can you find me a ranting dramatist of them all who hasn't seasoned that dish in every conceivable way?"

She pleated little folds in her cloak and regarded him calmly. "I know you when you talk that way, Robert. I know. But it doesn't make the slightest difference. It made no difference when you cleared the path for my mother by getting that letter back from Jerry Coskar. Nor when you cleared it again by preventing an interruption on my wedding night that would have made the wedding impossible. Nor many times since."

"Your mother?" he asked, twisting his blade once more.



HERE WAS THE BALM, THE SOLACE AND THE LIFE.—*Page 287.*

"Why do you fence with me?" she said with a faint flush. "I never hid it from you, even at the first. I was willing that the marriage should be prevented. It was my mother who wished it, and I have bitterly unwished it since. You were helping her."

"Is that all I was doing?" He leaned forward a little.

"No," she said slowly. "You were afraid to—to put your visor up. In cold fact, you would not permit yourself to look upon the truth. I had no fortune. I could not have helped you in your climbing, and at that time nothing else was of importance."

It was his turn to flush. She was right. She knew him, had traced the thread of his motive through the maze he had woven about himself. And now she touched him on that tenderest masculine spot—his vanity.

He strode to her and caught her in his arms. She yielded her lithe body to him as he kneeled beside her, clinging close, and signal spoke to signal in their eyes. Here was the balm and the solace and the life.

He said it fiercely, while he sought her lips.

"We will go away," she murmured against his shoulder. "My little dowry that you tended so carefully has grown to be more than enough for us. We will find a far corner somewhere."

"Yes."

"You have won your way where you wished to go and you have seen what it had to offer, and it was worthless."

"Yes."

"And you have a shred of a backward thought for it because it was false and shallow and cruel."

"Yes, and cruel," he repeated. He thought of the dark strife he had waged to no purpose; how the judges had judged him from the dust of battle; how he had been banished as a loser while still standing firm; how Reggie Detray had been the messenger of that defeat; how, because he was not one of the demi-gods, he must go back the way he had come. It was cruel. Let him take his prize and be gone.

A tiny thought wisp obtruded, whirling through the undammed surge in his heart, through the sweeping demand for love and comfort and compensation and healing. It would be the surrender; it would be the final striking of the pennon he had held aloft. Even though the others might think him beaten, there remained his own knowledge that he was not. And to surrender now would be to justify——

Wait! There was more behind. He had thrown a disguising glamor upon the situation. But he knew, even in that mad moment, that the one whole spot in his ragged remnant of self-respect was the fact that this was a good fight and he had not yet lost it. He held the wisp fast and caught another. The reason for his desperate attack upon Detray had been because that remnant was more than dear to him—it was essential. Again, he caught another. If he had lost that remnant he would become just the low, cheap, despicable adventurer he had al-

ways held himself above—the man who stole because he was not wise enough to be honest.

"I rather thought it might be this way," she said with level eyes that met his proudly and even steadily. "But I wanted to make sure. We won't carry on our little problem play, Robert. It ends here. Good-by." He took her hand a moment. It was cold, and she withdrew it quickly. Afterward he went to the window and saw her enter a taxicab, which turned and disappeared toward Fifth Avenue.

Suddenly his outer door slammed with a crash. He started, frowning, and waited impatiently with his gaze on the curtains. Hopkins insinuated himself into the room with his card tray and respectfully presented a telegram. Carter tore it open and unfolded the yellow enclosure. This is what he read:

"You win. Osterman died at Hot Springs this evening. Congratulations. REGGIE."

Carter returned the telegram to its original folds with great precision, replaced it in the envelope and put it carefully into his pocket.

CHAPTER XIX

A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

CARTER had started up the inclined gangway from the clubhouse float to the pier before he saw her. She had taken two steps down before she saw him. Eyes flashed against eyes in the parry of glances. She hesitated just the fraction of an instant, then swept on carelessly, with fixed interest in a motor-boat that was swooping toward the end of the landing. He kept his gaze, direct and challenging, upon her, but she was quite unaware of his presence. There was no hint of color in her face.

She drew aside slightly against the handrail to let him pass. Until he reached her he was fully determined to speak, a decision in which her pause confirmed him. But when he turned toward her the cold calm of her cheek chilled his resolution and he climbed on without a word. And this was their first meeting since her widowhood.

Of course, it was strictly none of Carter's business that Mrs. Osterman should choose to leave the clubhouse float in Horace Quirk's new motor-boat, nor that her one and only companion should be young Horace Quirk himself. But Carter, sitting on the

veranda, became most unwisely attentive to the conversation of Dorothea Pulsain, who had given him the benefit of her society, and followed the little scene at the water's edge with engrossed attention.

For a matter of months now he had been assiduously persistent in watching Mrs. Osterman from a distance, so the present phenomenon was not altogether remarkable. Certainly Miss Pulsain, though entertaining a distinct sensation of pique, found nothing extraordinary in it.

"What a beautiful boat Horace has this year!" she observed, falling in abreast of his train of thought with dangerous ease and sweetness. He nodded absently.

"And do notice how delightfully careful he is in helping Marion aboard. Really, now, right out there on the dock! Did you see that?" Apparently, from his scowl and his sudden flush, he did. Certainly the manner in which the charming young widow accepted Quirk's aid, as well as the manner in which it was offered, was not that of casual acquaintance. The fact that she looked distractingly dainty and girlish in her yachting costume after her months of mourning added considerably to the picture. Dorothea smiled.

"Do you know, I never quite believed what every one's been saying. But I do now. Don't you?"

"What?" growled Carter ungraciously.

"Oh, what?" returned Dorothea innocently. "How should I know? But there they are. And I must say that they make a very handsome and a very well-matched couple."

"Dorothea," said the Virginian suddenly, "your finesse is something to marvel at."

"So I've been told," she said. "There they go. Dear me! how gallant Horace looks at the wheel! To think that I never noticed his really magnificent presence before, and his taste, particularly in motor-boats. But it's too late, isn't it?"

"Delicate as a war club," commented Carter, but he winced none the less.

"I wonder where they're going to?" said Dorothea as they watched the craft shoot swiftly out, leaving a boiling wake of white. Something in the tone aroused Carter, and he looked at his companion suspiciously.

"Well, where?" he asked sharply.

"Goodness, how boorish you are!"

Whereupon Carter read himself a brief lecture, for possibly the thousandth time, to the effect that it is never well to treat any woman with scant attention, no matter how unnecessary she may appear to be at any given moment.

"Dorothea," he said humbly.

"Yes?"

"Tell me."

"What?"

"Will you have some chocolate and a baba au rhum?" he asked desperately.

"Of course. How nice of you!" she said sweetly.

It was half an hour of penance, but he endured it manfully, submitting to Dorothea's sledge-hammer wit with good grace. At the end he triumphed, as he always could, even with Dorothea.

"They've gone to the Pine Point Inn for dinner," said that young woman finally. "And much good may the information do you."

"Sometimes I could almost love you, Dorothea," he murmured.

"What's that?" she asked hastily.

"Nothing. There's a dance at Pine Point to-night, isn't there?"

"Yes, there is, and I'm going, though I haven't any one for escort but the Stuyver girls."

"Then if you had some one for the trip there you'd at least be fifty per cent. better off than you are in the present prospect. You could come back with the Stuyver girls just the same."

"Depends upon the some one. It might be minus fifty per cent.," she answered promptly.

"A shrewd hit; oh, a shrewd hit," said Carter. "However, do you spurn the offer?"

Dorothea might wield a heavy conversational fist, but she was not stupid nor was she ill natured. She considered the Virginian a moment quizzically. "What offer can you make for such a concession?" she asked.

"Two more babas."

"Done," she said; "but you'll have to dance with me three times."

"Make it five. I mean dances, not babas."

"Oh-h-h!" The exclamation was accompanied with lifted brows and a look of deeper understanding.

Further single-stick conflict was prevented by the

entrance of Sam Pulsain, who greeted the Virginian joyously and threw his cap in the cake dish.

"Say, Dolly, you're going to Pine Point to-night, aren't you?" he asked.

"Thanks. You should have put in your application earlier, Sam."

"No, hang it, that isn't what I meant. I find I can't go myself. But I want you to ask Horace Quirk if he'll tow that skiff back for me. He got away before I could see him."

"Of course I'll ask him," said Dorothea. "Or if I don't Mr. Carteret will. Mr. Quick and he are such great friends!"

Carter shook his head in silence at the speaker, expressing awed admiration at this triumph of repartee.

When the Virginian guided Miss Pulsain out into the circling measures of the first dance at the Pine Point that evening he felt that he might righteously congratulate himself. There were few prettier girls on the floor and certainly no better dancer than Dorothea. The crowd was very good, considering the place and the season, and he noted the Stanchfields, the Gatz-Browns and the Mannards in the palm room. It was a yachting set, and most of them had evidently been out that afternoon, for informal garb prevailed.

Meanwhile he was alert for a certain couple, and presently he sighted them, swinging in from the doorway. He tacked until he knew they were near, then maneuvered about them, keeping his back turned.

"She's looking remarkably well," announced the

irrepressible Dorothea, while he held his relative position. "She'll never speak to me again, though. Now to the right. That's it. If you'll reverse at this corner we'll be just behind them."

"Has she seen us?" asked Carter eagerly, accepting Dorothea's aid willingly. "She wasn't looking this way."

"Don't worry. She's already dissected me. I'm perfectly certain that my hair is down, my waist doesn't fit, and I have a hole in my stocking. Now port your helm, captain."

"Ay, ay, madam," said the Virginian. Each time he could bring his glance to bear he saw Mrs. Osterman and Horace Quirk, both equally oblivious to his existence. He saw, too, with a pardonable vanity in small things, that Quirk was fully three inches shorter than himself, that he held his head forward and that he was a decidedly inferior dancer. With this much encouragement and with the continued assurances of Dorothea that Marion was watching them he felt emboldened.

No sapient commentator since the world began has ever compiled a list of the various ways of making love without including mention of love-making in a dance. Carter was as familiar with this item as he was with all the others, and he now proceeded to demonstrate. In so doing he was taking no advantage of Dorothea, who possibly was quite as adept as himself. He wooed her discreetly, with proper restraint, but to the initiated unmistakably. It was

largely a matter of eyes, and Dorothea understood at the first flash.

"I don't know whether you're worth it, R. Pendleton," she said pensively.

"Worth what?"

"My helping you any more."

"Please do," he said.

"But it's such an old trick. Don't you suppose she'll guess?"

"I can't help it. It's the only chance I have left."

So Dorothea, good-natured, daring, whimsical Dorothea, lent her aid, and the sapient makers of lists could have learned something from the result.

"You won't need the other two," said Dorothea, "and now I'll bring joy and light to the hearts of yon desolated swains who have been trying to break through you all evening."

They were standing in the hall after the third dance, and out on the steps Carter caught a glimpse of a slim, cloaked figure that was just parting, with gay laughter, from old Gatz-Brown, who had imprisoned one hand.

"Good-by, Dorothea, you dear girl!" cried Carter, and he was off like a shot through the dance hall, through a maze of corridors to the outer wing, nearest the boat dock. He arrived on the landing breathless but with time to spare. A number of small craft lay moored at both sides, and out at the end he saw Quirk's new motor-boat.

He was ready for anything, violence if need be, and he began by buying the aged boat-keeper, body, soul

and lantern, for a yellow-backed bill. Then he climbed into the motor-boat. "Just a joke on a friend, you understand?" he said to his new confederate.

"Yes, sir; all right, sir."

"Well, stand by with that lantern and obey orders. Turn your back to me."

Two figures, one in white, faintly seen in the thin stream of yellow rays, were stepping on to the shoreward end of the landing. A fairly brisk wind was whipping down the shore, driving little slapping waves against the craft, and under cover of the sound and the darkness Carter started the engines. They ran quietly, with an oily purr, at low speed, while the launch tugged gently at her moorings.

"Be ready with your lines," warned the Virginian.

He would have played the desperate buccaneer with great willingness, but the developments took easier shape. One of the figures, that in white, came on alone. The other paused, busied with something at the side of the dock. Carter, crouched behind the engines, clutching the speed lever, whispered a quick direction:

"Help her in—help her in, you lunatic!"

The boat-keeper obeyed, dropped down into the forward compartment of the craft and held out a hand. She came forward with some hesitation and stood for a moment on the edge of the landing, a radiant vision against the curtain of the night in the full glow of the lantern, skirts gathered daintily and peering down into the launch. While the Virginian

held his breath he heard the slow approach of Quirk along the side. The steps had almost reached the motor-boat. Then Marion accepted the proffered aid of the boat-keeper and jumped lightly aboard.

Instantly the man sprang to the landing. Carter stood up.

“Cast off!” he roared. There was a quick scramble. The Virginian threw over his lever. The boat churned and lunged against her lines. The forward one was almost instantly released. As the boat-keeper caught at the other one there was a yell from Quirk and a frightened scream from Marion. Suddenly freed, the launch crawled away from the landing, rapidly gaining speed. Carter, looking back as he started for the wheel, saw a strange scene on the landing in the wavering light of the lantern. Quirk gave the boat-keeper a violent push that sent him staggering, then he leaped violently from the dock, apparently in a mad and hopeless effort to reach the stern of the launch, which was fully fifteen feet away.

Carter saw no more, for the craft was headed toward a jutting point. He hurried past Marion, who was huddled on the cushions, and gained the wheel. Once on a safe course he turned to her. It was too dark to read faces. Each was a blot in the gloom to the other.

“Don’t be frightened, Marion,” he said. “You must have guessed it was I.”

A little gasp came in answer, and she sat suddenly erect. Carter discovered, what he had not counted

upon, that the situation was somewhat embarrassing. But he advanced the attack.

"I couldn't help it, Marion. You have avoided me persistently, and I simply had to have a word with you. You must have known that I would not be content, that I would find some such means as this. It was impossible that we should go on the way we were."

He moved a little closer on the cushions. But still she made no reply. "Won't you say something? Won't you say, at least, that you'll listen to me?"

"You seem to have taken that quite out of my hands," she said coldly. He had been waiting with sensitive ear for her first word. He could take little encouragement from the tone. He had hoped for some agitation. It would have meant more to him. But here, after the first shock of surprise, she was quite self-possessed. He sensed some inner defense against him, a thing she had never made him feel before. He had planned no further than the overcoming of the protection that the presence of others furnished her. Quirk! Was it possible that, after all—

As pat as if the thought had been the cue there came a shout, not from the shore, but from close at hand, at the stern. Carter, startled, rose and scrambled aft. A rift in the clouds flooded the scudding launch with moonlight, and close behind, lying flat in the bow of a small craft, with outstretched hand within a few feet of the low rail, was Quirk. For an instant Carter thought that his rival was pursuing in

another launch. Then he saw a tow rope in Quirk's hand and understood. It was Sam's skiff. Quirk had made it fast before the start from the landing, and had leaped into it as the motor-boat drew away.

The Virginian fumbled in the tool locker and found a large and heavy wrench. Then he climbed out on the overhang and waved it in close proximity to Quirk's head.

"Back up!"

Quirk, who had nearly handed himself up the rope, glared at him until surprise mastered anger. "Good Lord! Is that Carteret?"

"The same," said Carter bluntly.

"Well, what is all this? Have you gone mad?"

"Dangerously. I've come aboard for an uninterrupted conversation with Mrs. Osterman, and I'm going to have it. Now you drop away and be quiet, or I'll try this on you. Nice hefty thing, a wrench."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the voice, and Quirk, bewildered and spluttering, made haste to let out slack. Carter took up his position by the engine, where he could watch Quirk and talk to Marion. He found a little auxiliary steering knob against the gunwale, and he was thus in complete command. He was about to resume his conversation with Marion, who had been a silent observer of the incident, when there came a hail from Quirk.

"Oh, Marion!" he called. "Don't be afraid of the fellow. I am here."

But Carter would not even take the time to smile. "It's no use, Marion," he said earnestly. "You can-

not draw into a shell of reserve with me. We have been too frank. You know me, and once made me know myself. I was an adventurer. Yes. I could not take you as a girl without fortune. No. I aided your marriage. Yes. After all that and in spite of it all you acknowledged our love. Can you deny it now?"

"I shall have him arrested immediately we land!" yelled Quirk valiantly.

"You must have felt how near I was to forgetting everything the last time we met, when your husband, so far as we knew, was still alive," pleaded Carter, with the old leaping flame in his heart.

"Never fear, the fellow shall suffer for this!" howled Quirk.

"You would not have had me otherwise, knowing me as you do," went on Carter. "If I drew back it was the one thing that kept me from being quite worthless, quite the wretched, common soldier of fortune. Let us stand straight to the problem. You are taking the pose that I seek reconciliation because, being free once more, you have riches. Yes and no, Marion; yes and no. You understand. Am I not honest with you?"

"If he is annoying you, jump overboard, Marion. I will pick you up," came the shrill voice of Quirk.

"Do you prefer that?" asked Carter, waving toward the skiff. What was wrong? She made no answer. He was positive that by now he had sufficiently discredited Quirk.

Then Carter staked his chance on a swift change of tactics, driven thereto by her unmoved silence. "Very well, Marion," he said gravely. "I have made my one stand for happiness. I owed myself at least that. I will restore your vociferous friend to you and go. He is a fortunate man. There is nothing more to be said." He turned away, but a slender hand caught his sleeve.

"Do you wish to go back and dance some more—with Dorothea?" she asked tremulously, shyly.

He laughed a laugh of sheer delight and content and caught her boldly in his arms. She surrendered herself to him with a little sigh. "So that was it?" he said.

"He shall suffer for his impudent audacity," came the wail from Quirk.

"Shall he?" whispered Carter. The answer was inarticulate.

They were half a mile from the boatclub landing now and Carter left her a moment while he severed Quirk's painter, greatly to the indignation and dismay of that young man. Then he turned the launch for a wide circle and sent it out swiftly into the perfect night, that they two might be alone in this their hour.

It was over, the long campaign, the time of painful scaling of the social heights, the skirmishes, the ambuscades, the schemings, the partial triumphs and bitter defeats. Single-handed he had conquered field after field, captured fortress after fortress, where

the purple flag floats above the gilded ramparts of the elect. Now, with the reinforcement of Marion and the zinc millions, the citadel lay just before him. It would capitulate. The struggle was past. The rest was merrymaking.

He looked back to the day when he had come to the great city, a poor boy from Virginia, with nothing but his good looks, his tact, his shrewdness and his premature knowledge of the world as capital. He had gone far since then. Scarcely any door was closed against him. He belonged to the most exclusive clubs. His private fortune was ample for his own needs. His clothes, his horses, his automobiles set the fashion. It needed but the charming wife and the millions to buttress his life position. And now he held them.

Still wrapped in his dreams and his happiness, Carter finally drove the launch into the boatclub landing. The flaring electric reflector made the place as bright as a stage, and as he helped Marion upon it a figure swept out of the shadows.

“Congratulations, you two!”

It was Dorothea, the inimitable, the ever helpful, and she held out a hand to each.

“Huh?” said Carter, blinking.

“You don’t mean to say you haven’t asked her yet?” exclaimed the subtle young woman.

“Dorothea,” said Carter solemnly, “you surpass yourself. To pause a moment, Mr. Quirk is now rowing your brother’s skiff in. I will ask you to present

him my best thanks for the use of his motor-boat. Marion and I have a train to catch."

"Oh, then you have asked her?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I haven't yet. But I will now. Watch me."

THE END

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